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Yuan Shikai

A Reappraisal

PATRICK FULIANG SHAN



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A Note on Romanization

Following the current trend of scholarship, this book adopts the *pinyin* system of transliteration for Chinese personal names, places, and special phrases. To respect Chinese customs, the surname appears before the given name. In the bibliography, however, the surname is provided first but is not separated from the given name by a comma. For Chinese-American or Chinese-Canadian names, their surnames appear after their given names, just like other American or Canadian names. Special phrases are transliterated in a combination of a few Chinese syllables. For example, *Qieguodadao* appears as one phrase, instead of four separate syllables. For Chinese publishers, their *pinyin* names are rendered without further translation. Almost all Chinese names are romanized in *pinyin*, but some long-accepted Wade-Giles versions are retained; notably, “Sun Yat-sen” rather than the *pinyin* “Sun Zhongshan” and “Chiang Kai-shek” instead of “Jiang Jieshi.” Traditional terms are kept, such as “*ginseng*” rather than the Mandarin “*renshen*.” Occasionally, the name of a famous personage is provided in *pinyin* followed by its original Wade-Giles version in brackets. “Yuan Shikai,” is spelled according to the *pinyin* system, rather than the Wade-Giles “Yuan Shih-kai,” or another variant “Yuan Shi-k’ai,” which were the two spellings known to the world when he was president of China.

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Yuan Shikai

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Introduction

The century-old negative image of Yuan Shikai, the first president of the Republic of China (1912–16), is now deeply embedded in modern Chinese culture and history. He is decried as the most despicable traitor who sold out the reformers of 1898; he is denounced as the most regressive of politicians who defended an obsolete feudal system; he is reviled as the most notorious usurper who snatched away the fruits of the 1911 Revolution; he is condemned as a most ruthless dictator who concentrated power in his own hands during his presidency; and he is slammed as the most reactionary of warlords, who commanded a powerful army personally loyal to himself.¹ Given such accusations, it suits Yuan's fellow Chinese to view him as a stereotypical historical villain (*fanmianlishirenwu*).² Strangely enough, this negative image was well-preserved throughout the twentieth century and has even slipped uncritically into the new millennium. More oddly, this hideous effigy has been preserved both in the oral tradition and in written annals so well that he has become a prominent target of perpetual censure. Everything about Yuan seems to be negative, starting with his birth and ending with his death. All that occurred in between is dismissed as disgraceful. Indeed, Yuan has cast a lengthening sinister shadow upon twentieth-century culture in both Mainland China and Taiwan.

This phantasmagoric image of Yuan Shikai is now deeply imprinted on the collective memory of the Chinese people. A careful survey of the aforementioned “judgments” indicates that these negative images developed in accordance with the needs of political creeds and through the following perspectives: as an outgrowth of class categorization, whereby Yuan

was relegated to the feudal class; as a consequence of revolutionary judgment, in that Yuan was viewed as a counter-revolutionary; as the outcome of a moralistic verdict, in that Yuan was railed against as a traitor to the reformers. Needless to say, these political verdicts have forestalled a deeper and more impartial inquiry, and meanwhile, the majority of Chinese in both Mainland China and Taiwan have been influenced by this long-nurtured negative perspective. All of this has resulted in only a cursory study of Yuan. He epitomizes the dark side of history, he is an easy target for popular opprobrium, and he is a synonym for dishonour. Over the past century, few other men have been weighed down with such a villainous image.

The unique consensus between Mainland China and Taiwan on Yuan Shikai reflects the evolving political climate. The Nationalist Party's view is that Yuan was an enemy who suppressed Sun Yat-sen and his fellow Nationalists, betrayed the 1911 Revolution, and usurped the newly established republic for which Sun and his followers had sacrificed so many lives. According to the Chinese Communist Party, all of the previous regimes, including Yuan's, were reactionary, oppressive, and tyrannical and the Communists would have to topple them if history did not intervene first. With such a mindset, it is no wonder that Yuan's ignoble image has survived across the 1949 demarcation line and that his infamy persists on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Yuan Shikai's villainy is often mentioned in Chinese letters of all sorts. Almost all history textbooks comment negatively on him, as do other publications. Historical developments and regime changes have done nothing to weaken his unshakable infamy. We encounter this view of him in official documents, and meanwhile, individual writers have gone out of their way to criticize him. Political authors and civilian writers alike have adopted the same stance. For example, the earliest published work about Yuan is Huang Yi's *Yuanshidaoguoji* (*Records Revealing the Way Yuan Shikai Usurped the Nation*), published in 1916, in which Yuan is depicted as an immoral traitor and a cunning political operator. Huang Yi declares Yuan a "national thief" (*guozai*).³ In 1935, Bai Jiao, a Shanghai-based journalist, used the term "stealing the nation" (*daoguo*) to depict Yuan's machinations around the 1911 Revolution.⁴ But neither of these authors has been as influential as Chen Boda, a Communist theorist and Mao Zedong's personal secretary, who in 1946 bluntly labelled Yuan the "Great National Usurper" (*Qieguodadao*).⁵ And Chen's nomenclature has persisted in Chinese popular culture throughout the ensuing decades right down to this day.

It might seem that Yuan Shikai has been unanimously denounced, but this is not so. A careful reading of primary sources indicates that many people actually admired him, or at least judged him a bit more fairly. Family members described him as a strict but loving father to his children, a filial son to his parents, and a trustworthy man to his friends.⁶ When he became president, his long-time followers compiled a book highlighting his talent, sagacity, and bravery.⁷ His subordinates spoke highly of him – for instance, Gu Weijun (V.K. Wellington Koo; 1887–1985), a famous Chinese Nationalist diplomat, who once worked under Yuan, praised him as a remarkable figure, an intelligent man, and an admirable patriot.⁸ Foreign diplomats, including American and British ambassadors, offered positive comments on Yuan.⁹ Western missionaries complimented him as a patriot, a talented person, and a modernizer.¹⁰ American missionary Gilbert Reid esteemed Yuan as “a faultless man,” though he added that Yuan “unfortunately went astray because of misguidance.”¹¹

The 1990s saw a dramatic overhaul of Yuan’s evaluation. After nearly a century of violent revolutionary movements and mass political campaigns, the Chinese began to enjoy the fruits of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, which had been launched more than a decade earlier. As the country embarked on reform, the Chinese economy soared and citizens’ living standards rose significantly. Some Chinese scholars openly questioned whether revolution was the only approach to national salvation, and the country as a whole endorsed a more gentle approach to reform. All of this has affected current perceptions of Yuan. A voluminous literature about him has come into being. A few dozen biographies, hundreds of journal articles, and other kinds of literature, including novels and short stories, have been published, generating “Yuan Shikai Fever.” The quantity of this new assessment has not been matched by creative or ingenious quality; indeed, many of these writings tend to be repetitive in content – even “plagiaristic” in the Western sense.

The Chinese have since developed a strong interest in Yuan. In contrast to the previous notorious stereotype, he is now praised as a reformer, a modernizer, a national hero, a talented administrator, a wise politician, and an adept poet. His errors, such as his attempt to restore the dynastic system, are still censured, but his attempts to modernize the nation are praised. Many past accusations are quietly being dropped, and some scholars are going further, moving boldly to rehabilitate Yuan’s reputation.¹² Of course, these radical efforts are criticized by those who adhere to the traditional stance. All said, however, an objective image of Yuan

Shikai is slowly emerging, and this constitutes a sharp break from the past condemnations and disdainful denunciations.

Most of today's writers about Yuan Shikai focus on his vital role in training the first new modern army, his significant contributions during the New Administration (*xinzheng*), his crucial involvement in the "bloodless" 1911 Revolution (*Xinhaigeming*), his prominent role in the shift from empire to republic, his efforts to concentrate power during his wobbly presidency, and most importantly, his inglorious efforts to create the Hongxian monarchy. The newly published literature tends to be narrative in nature and lacks in-depth analysis. Large gaps are evident regarding Yuan's elite background, his tempestuous childhood, and his eventful Korean years. Fortunately, *Yuan Shikai quanji* (*The Complete Works of Yuan Shikai*) published in late 2013 by Henan University Press, offers voluminous primary sources that allow us to probe Yuan's family background and personal experiences. These thirty-six volumes were compiled by two Chinese scholars of Guangdong, Luo Baoshan and Liu Lusheng, who devoted three decades to collecting and editing Yuan Shikai's written works. *Yuan Shikai quanji* includes thousands of official documents and personal letters. Some of the documents may have been written by his aides or secretaries but nonetheless were approved by Yuan. With all of this new abundance, we now have no reason to complain about the dearth of primary sources, at least not in the Chinese materials.

By contrast, Western literature on Yuan Shikai is quite scanty. Over the past century, only one biography has been published – by Jerome Chen, a Chinese Canadian scholar, in 1961.¹³ In the almost six decades since, there has not been a second one in English. Chen is clearly an expert on modern China, and he skilfully weaves narratives about Yuan's role in Chinese politics. Yet his book has become outdated for modern readers – given the wealth of new materials available, it is a useful but timeworn volume whose narrative would benefit from comprehensive analysis and insightful interpretation, and it lacks materials about Yuan's family background and early years that are now available. Some chapters offer more about national history than about Yuan himself, making the book a concise account of the events during Yuan's lifetime. Also, Chen's use of the old Wade-Giles system for Chinese terms poses a barrier for twenty-first-century readers.

Two important monographs about Yuan Shikai and his political career have been published.¹⁴ One is Stephen R. MacKinnon's volume about Yuan as an important Qing official in Tianjin and Beijing between 1901 and 1908. In that book, MacKinnon challenges some Chinese scholars'

arguments about the centrifugal nature of political power during the late Qing Empire and about power devolving from the centre to provincial elites. MacKinnon examines the three expanding nodes of power: the centre, the provinces, and the regions. He argues that Yuan's case did not reflect the centrifugal theory. Instead, he notes that Yuan maintained strong ties with the Imperial Court from which he received his power. MacKinnon points out that Yuan was a talented official who positioned himself at the intersection of those three nodes of power, relying on the Imperial Court but responding to the needs of provincial and local elites. MacKinnon also observes the strong foreign influence on Chinese politics. Another important monograph is Ernest P. Young's discourse on Yuan Shikai's presidency (1912–16), which focuses on the two trends of conservatism and liberalism during the years when Yuan was the national leader. Rejecting the notion that Yuan was a reactionary warlord, Young carefully analyses Yuan's policies as well as his relations with the gentry and the military. Young demonstrates that Yuan was extremely power-hungry and increasingly concentrated power in his own hands. The monographs by MacKinnon and Young were typical of Western scholarship on Yuan. However, they were published in 1977 and 1980 respectively and need to be supplemented with new findings and new sources. More importantly, these two scholars do not deal much with Yuan's personal life, focusing instead on the power structure and political affairs during the years from 1901 to 1916.

There is an urgent need for a twenty-first-century biography of Yuan Shikai that incorporates newly unearthed primary sources, that integrates existing scholarship, and that offers fresh perspectives. Such a book would fill the void left by the long interval since Chen's biography appeared in 1961; it would also help Western readers understand modern Chinese history and politics as well as, more broadly, new trends in Chinese civilization. In many ways, Yuan embodied the enormous changes taking place in modern China, and an understanding of him will help readers understand the country's recent past. Because of the voluminous recent literature and the new availability of primary source materials, it is now possible to write a comprehensive biography of Yuan. A new assessment of him in the context of his family background and the momentous changes China underwent during his lifetime will do much to inform – and intrigue – readers in this new century.

Yuan Shikai was first and foremost a product of history. He was the scion of an elite family, a product of his foreign mission, a crystallization of his military program, an artefact of turbulent political changes, and an outcome of his own personal ambition. Yuan built his power base on the

ruins of the declining Qing Empire, yet he never earned a degree in the Civil Service Examination System and thus did not rise through normal channels. He took the side of the imperial system, yet he endeavoured to modernize his country through reforms. He was a new man in the old system, but at the same time he was an old-timer among new modernizers. Yuan represents and perhaps embodies a bundle of contradictions within the declining Qing dynasty and the rising Chinese Republic. He enjoyed speedy promotion but through atypical channels. Unlike most officials rising from the grassroots to the provincial administration and then to the central government, he achieved prominence through a combination of foreign missions, military power, civilian management, and political manoeuvring. He never joined the revolutionary movement, but he easily landed the job as the first president of the post-revolutionary government and the newly established republic.

In retrospect, Yuan Shikai as a historical figure was produced by a number of historical factors, such as personal and social networks, individual gifts, propitious opportunities, domestic supports, foreign encouragement, and – most importantly – the 1911 Revolution. Yuan as a historical figure can be viewed as a political phenomenon, or a cultural happening, or a historical instance during the era of transition from empire to republic. These dramatic historical forces turned Yuan into a unique figure. His rise exemplifies the importance of the local gentry class, represents the rising supremacy of the military in civil politics, betokens soaring Han Chinese nationalism, and signals China's efforts to modernize. Yuan was shaped by his time and by his world, which together transformed him into a national figure.

This book is a study of Yuan Shikai from his birth to his death. It has a dozen chapters, each focusing on a particular time span. Instead of offering a narrative, each chapter provides an analysis that interprets Yuan as a historical figure. Readers will come to understand that Yuan was strongly impacted by his country's multiple and widely disruptive transformations. Given that he experienced the mass rebellions of the mid-nineteenth century, the self-strengthening movement, the Sino-foreign conflicts, the reform movement, the 1911 Revolution, and the founding of the republic, this book amounts to a discourse on those turbulent times, one that will enable readers to comprehend modern Chinese history through the lens of Yuan Shikai.

It is not my intention to glorify Yuan, as some readers might expect. Yuan needs no rehabilitation. One hundred years have passed since his death, and any effort at such a rehabilitation – especially in the new

century – would be irrelevant. Instead, this book presents a fair appraisal and an objective assessment. It will neither hide his mistakes nor exaggerate his contributions. It treats his life as a totality, examining the factors that led to his rise and scrutinizing his role in modern China's great transformation. Fair assessment does not mean rehabilitating him but rather presenting him objectively as a historical figure. To assess him fairly is not to downplay the heroism of the pioneering revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen, who launched a major revolution to overthrow the Qing dynasty. Rather, Yuan Shikai and Sun Yat-sen represent two distinct paths for modern China: Yuan was a conservative reformer and a modernizer; Sun was a radical revolutionary and also a modernizer. The fact that Sun's followers sacrificed their lives and forsook personal happiness qualifies them as national heroes. Nevertheless, Yuan too aimed at modernization, albeit by a different route. Ultimately, the two forces, along with others, worked together to bring down Qing imperial rule and to offer China a new republic. Through political manoeuvres, Yuan and Sun reached a compromise to build a republican system, for which Yuan seemingly could have become another George Washington, as many of his countrymen at the time eagerly anticipated.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the modernizing former governor general and military leader of the *ancien regime* committed a fatal mistake by trying to restore monarchism, which discredited him and cast him in a notorious light. Yuan's efforts in this regard were his own error; they were not only his personal tragedy but also the catastrophic misfortune of his nation.

I

An Elite Clan

It is quite logical to suppose that a man is impacted by his family upbringing, influenced by his cultural setting, affected by his communal ties, and moulded by his childhood experiences. However, a person's early years are usually notoriously cloudy due to the lack of original and reliable records. The story of Yuan Shikai's childhood is no exception: it was not well recorded. Furthermore, the many politicized rumours about Yuan's life have rendered his early years bewilderingly hazy. It is no simple task, then, to restore all the episodes of his early years. Nevertheless, from Yuan's family pedigree, county gazetteers, individual memoirs, and family letters we can trace his family background, map his childhood, and learn about the social and historical milieu in which he grew up. A probe into the available sources tells us that Yuan was deeply affected by his social environment. His family background and his multiple personal odysseys greatly shaped his personality and character. That social environment included the regional culture into which he was born, the elite family that raised him, the turbulent history he encountered, and the imperial decay he experienced. This complex setting significantly moulded his childhood – and his future.

THE ROOT

The environment in which Yuan Shikai was born in 1859 was not congenial. His hometown of Xiangcheng in Henan Province is located close to where four provinces meet: Henan, Anhui, Jiangsu, and Shandong. This border

region, between the Huai and Yellow Rivers, was a hotbed of peasant uprisings, as Elizabeth Perry has noted.¹ The very first peasant rebellion, led by Chen Sheng and Wu Guang two millennia ago, started in this border region. The Nian Rebellion was in full swing in this very area when Yuan Shikai was born.² Many authors who wrote about Xiangcheng concurred that this was a poor county that suffered from frequent floods, droughts, and other natural disasters. Because Yuan was born and spent his early years here, he was often referred to as Yuan Xiangcheng after he had become a leading national political figure. As a convenience, primary sources and official documents used Xiangcheng as an equivalent to his given name. Even those who condemned him referred to him in this way. Of course, other famous historical figures have gone by a combination of surname and county name, such as Kang Nanhai for Kang Youwei.

The Yuan family had not always resided in Xiangcheng: local gazetteers and the Yuan clan registers show that it originated in Runan Prefecture (*Runanjun*), which is why the Yuan family was sometimes referred to as “the Prominent Clan of Runan.”³ According to scholarly research, the surname Yuan originated in Runan in ancient times and spread from there to other regions of China. Prior to Yuan Shikai’s thirteenth ancestor’s migration to Xiangcheng, the Yuans were farmers in Ruyang in Runan Prefecture (today’s Shangshui County). During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the Yuans moved to and settled in Xiangcheng. Over the next few generations the Yuan family relocated their residence a number of times within Xiangcheng County, all the while continuing to be ordinary farmers, tilling the land and following traditional agrarian ways.⁴

It is interesting to note that Yuan Shikai’s humble roots would be exalted by his followers when he became president of China. To lionize Yuan and to support his endeavours to re-establish monarchism, Zhang Canghai fabricated Yuan’s ancestral record, claiming that Yuan was a descendant of Yuan Chonghuan (1584–1630), a national military commander during the late Ming dynasty. Zhang asserted that Yuan Shikai was a direct lineal descendant of this famous general. According to him, Yuan Shikai’s family migrated from Guangdong (Yuan Chonghuan’s home province) to Henan over a long period but eventually settled down in Xiangcheng. Through this fabrication, Zhang Canghai contended that since Yuan Chonghuan had fought against the Manchus, his descendant now (Yuan Shikai) was the legitimate successor to the Manchus. Thus, it was only logical for Yuan to establish a new dynasty. When presented with this fraudulent assertion, Yuan did not protest – indeed, he concurred. That said, scholars can find

no proof of this alleged connection. Another of Yuan Shikai's supporters stated that his ancestor was Yuan Shao (?–202), a famous late Han military commander. This claim could possibly be true, given that Yuan Shao indeed came from Runan, but the problem remains that no reliable evidence has been found to validate this tie.⁵

What we do know is that the Yuan family had settled permanently in the relatively backward county of Xiangcheng thirteen generations before Yuan Shikai's birth. Recent archaeological findings in Yuan cemeteries confirm that the Yuan family migrated within the county in search of choice land, new opportunities, and a better life. The two conflicting birthplaces for Yuan Shikai corroborate his family's migration. One claim was rendered by his son Yuan Kewen, who argued that Yuan Shikai was born in Zhangying, just north of the county seat. Another claim states that he was born in Yuanzhai, about ten miles southeast of the county seat. Either one might be correct, but it is appropriate to affirm that Yuan Shikai was born in 1859 in Xiangcheng, to which he had perpetual ties. After leaving Xiangcheng and becoming a Qing official, he visited Xiangcheng four times (1881, 1891–92, 1895, and 1902) to arrange family funerals, deal with clan issues, or await a new official appointment. The total duration of those four visits exceeded one year. Nevertheless, during his time as a leading national political figure, from 1902 when he buried his birth mother to his own death in Beijing in 1916, he never returned to Xiangcheng County.⁶ Even so, he was known as Yuan Xiangcheng – a fact that supports R. Keith Schoppa's theory of spatial identity with one's native place.⁷

A RISING CLAN

As just shown, Yuan Shikai's ancestors were no more than ordinary farmers, like most Chinese at that time. But Chinese society was somewhat fluid. China was not like India, where the caste system blocked social elevation and prevented class mobility. In China, lower-class people could achieve prominence in a number of ways, such as through military feats, commercial success, land speculation, marital ties, political alliances, and social relations. The most important route of all was the Civil Service Examination System (*keju*), which offered three highly competitive examinations at the county, province, and imperial capital levels and which conferred three different degrees – *xiucaí*, *juren*, and *jinshi*, respectively. This system allowed successful candidates to become government officials,

imperial staff, and local elites. The Yuans thrived under this system and began their rise.

The first successful degree holder in the Yuan family was Yuan Shikai's great-grandfather, Yuan Yaodong, who lived during Emperor Qianlong's reign (r. 1735–96). Through arduous work, Yuan Yaodong earned his *xiucaï* degree and became the first glory of his family. As a result of this success he was able to marry Lady Guo from a wealthy family in the nearby county of Huaining. Lady Guo, a well-educated woman, gave birth to four sons and one daughter. Unfortunately for her, her husband Yuan Yaodong died at the age of forty. Understanding the importance of the Civil Service Examination System, she admonished her children to prepare for it and exhorted them to immerse themselves in the Chinese classics. To her satisfaction, her four sons – Yuan Shusan, Yuan Jiasan, Yuan Fengsan, and Yuan Zhongsan – all obtained the *xiucaï* degree, and Yuan Jiasan went even further to earn the *juren* and finally the highly coveted *jinshi* degree. All four sons became Lady Guo's pride. For these accomplishments, she was extolled as a virtuous woman in the county history of Xiangcheng.⁸ The next generation maintained the family glory by again excelling in the Civil Service Examination System: of Yuan Shusan's two sons, Yuan Baozhong (Yuan Shikai's father) achieved the *xiucaï* degree and Yuan Baoqing the *xiucaï* and *juren* degrees. Of Yuan Jiasan's two sons, Baoheng won the *xiucaï*, *juren*, and *jinshi* degrees and Baoling the *xiucaï* and *juren* degrees. In a county as impoverished as Xiangcheng, it was extremely rare for a family to produce two *jinshi*, two *juren*, and many *xiucaï* degrees. Naturally, the Yuans were highly esteemed in Xiangcheng. With so many members obtaining degrees, more than twenty Yuans became government officials, and in this way they established special ties with the Qing Empire. So it is no wonder that Yuan Shikai expressed his gratitude to the Imperial Court, stating that the Yuans had been the beneficiaries of “the profound royal grace” (*guochaozhong'en*)⁹ and “holy grace for three generations” (*sheng'ensanshi* or *guo'ensanshi*).¹⁰ Undoubtedly, the Yuan clan was a local pillar of the empire. This expanding clan would offer Yuan Shikai a solid foundation for his future official promotion.

Among all the Yuan officials, Yuan Shikai's great-uncle Yuan Jiasan (1806–63) was the most eminent. A holder of the *jinshi*, Yuan Jiasan was a high-ranking official in Beijing; he was appointed a special commissioner and then a governor to suppress the Nian Rebellion.¹¹ During the bloody civil war of the 1850s and 1860s, he was promoted to First Rank official and praised as a talented military commander. Zeng Guofan (1811–72), the leader of the Hunan Army (*Xiangjun*), lauded him as “a most solid

man whose talent enables him to handle the most important tasks.”¹² For his loyalty and his dedication, Yuan Jiasan was received fourteen times by Emperor Xianfeng. Yuan Jiasan did not create as powerful an army as Zeng Guofan or Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), the leaders of the Hunan and Anhui Armies, to address the complicated situation in the Henan–Anhui–Jiangsu–Shandong border region. But through his contributions, he was able to dominate most of the border region, bring the Nian Rebellion under control, and block a potential Taiping northern expedition. After Yuan Jiasan died in 1863, his brilliant reputation shone upon his future grand-nephew – so much so that the young Yuan Shikai was often revered as the brave descendant of a famous general (*jiangmenhuizi*).¹³

With so many successful officials in the clan, the Yuans prospered as landowners and commercial traders. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Yuan family had several dozen members, albeit some lived far away. All told, they owned 50,000 *mu* (8,237 acres) of land, besides operating a mortgage firm and running retail stores in cities such as Xiangcheng, Kaifeng, and Beijing.¹⁴ The impressive rise of the Yuans from simple farmers to part of the national elite transformed the clan into a powerhouse, one that Yuan Shikai would inherit. Various scholars have categorized this family in different ways – for example, as a landlord official family,¹⁵ a bureaucratic landlord family,¹⁶ and a large traditional bureaucratic landlord family.¹⁷ The key to understanding this powerful, rising clan was the Civil Service Examination System, which had offered the well-educated Yuans chances for promotion and had provided them with opportunities to amass wealth.

Yuan Shikai’s family undoubtedly provided him with opportunities for a strong education and a life free of care; it also offered him connections within the bureaucracy to further a political career. Indeed, he benefited enormously from his family’s wealth and social networks. He was not successful within the Civil Service Examination System; however, his foster father’s close friend, Wu Changqing, trained him to be a military commander, and this would prove crucial to his rise as a military officer and later as a political figure. Yuan Shikai’s uncle, Yuan Baoling, a high-ranking official in Beijing, also helped him. While Yuan Shikai was in Korea in the late nineteenth century, Yuan Baoling, who worked under Li Hongzhang, constantly offered him timely information and valuable advice.

So Yuan Shikai inherited land, wealth, social prestige, an official network, and Confucian statecraft from his family. At the same time, however, he continued various of his family’s propensities, such as for

concubines, and like them he embraced quasi-religious superstitions. Almost all the men in the family after his grandfather took concubines, which resulted in rapid reproduction. Yuan Shikai would continue this tradition by marrying ten women and begetting thirty-two children. Yuan, like all of his ancestors, was superstitious: he believed in *fengshui* and sought out diviners to cast prophesies. One unfortunate legacy of the Yuan family was that its men tended not to live long; past generations of Yuan males never lived beyond their late fifties.¹⁸ This was sometimes referred to as “the Yuan Curse.” According to one superstition, as enunciated by Yuan Shikai’s eldest son Yuan Keding, his father would build a new dynasty in order to end this perennial family scourge. Setting aside whether it was superstition that spurred Yuan to crown himself emperor in 1916, his doing so unfortunately did hasten his death. He would die at the age of fifty-six, thus seeming to validate the Yuan Curse.

YUAN SHIKAI’S BIRTH

Yuan Shikai was born into a distinguished clan on a momentous day. On the very day he was born, September 16, 1859, his great-uncle Yuan Jiasan won a decisive battle against the Nian rebels. The news of that glorious victory and Yuan Shikai’s entry into the world came almost simultaneously. On receiving this wonderful news, his father Yuan Baozhong chose Shikai as his given name. Shi means “the world”; it also stands for a generation of Yuans, in that all of Yuan Shikai’s brothers and cousins had “shi” as their middle name; “Kai,” which means “victory,” was selected to celebrate Yuan Jiasan’s victory in battle. Yuan Shikai’s alias, “Weiting” (comforting the village), implies that the good news of his birth gladdened the whole village. Thus, Yuan Shikai’s birth and his individual identity would be tied eternally to his family’s role in suppressing a peasant uprising.

Yuan Shikai’s first years coincided with a bloodstained civil war; this meant he experienced violence early, which shaped his character. To protect the family, the Yuans erected a large fort about ten miles southeast of the county seat. The fort, known as the Yuan Fort (*Yuanzhai*), was surrounded by high, thick walls, which enclosed multi-storey houses; in effect, it was a fortified village, a means of defence against the roving Nians.¹⁹ It was here that Yuan Shikai spent his toddler years and early childhood. According to one source, *Yuanzhai* was built in 1857,²⁰ which is why some writers assert that Yuan Shikai was born inside this fort. Yet his son Yuan Kewen claimed that he was born in Zhangying.²¹ The fort

had been built as a military defence project, but at the same time it served as a civilian settlement. It is said that more than two hundred people lived within its walls, including fifty members of the Yuan family and their servants. The construction of such forts – about 170 of them in Xiangcheng County alone during that decade – suggests the ferocious nature of the civil war between the Nian rebels and the local elites.²² In this mid-nineteenth-century conflict, the population of this border region fell substantially – a nearby county was depopulated by one-third.²³ Of course, Yuan Jiasan's troops themselves contributed to this depopulation; for example, when his soldiers occupied Linhuaiguan in 1859, all persons aged fifteen to seventy were killed under his orders.²⁴

Perhaps his constant exposure as a youth to the merciless civil war, and his familiarity with military combat, moulded Yuan Shikai into a fearless boy. His valour would later be viewed by others as a trait he was born with, but it should also be seen as a result of his childhood experiences. Indeed, Yuan Shikai would display his mettle on many occasions, as one testimony demonstrates:

The Nian bandits roamed in Anhui and Henan and often frequented the nearby area of Yuanzhai for pillage and seizure. Many children were terrified. In contrast, the five-year-old Yuan Shikai climbed up onto the rampart of the high wall. Without any trace of dread, he observed the ferocious fighting near the wall beneath, parading his valor and demonstrating his resolution.²⁵

Yuan later brought the same dauntlessness to his military career and his political life.

Yuan Shikai's status as a concubine's son strongly impacted his life. His father, Yuan Baozhong, married two women of the same surname, Liu. The first Lady Liu, Baozhong's principal wife, gave birth to Yuan Shichang (who died at birth) and Yuan Shidun. Because Yuan Shichang died soon after birth, Yuan Shidun became the lineal son (*dichu*). The second Lady Liu, a concubine, gave birth to four sons: Yuan Shilian, Yuan Shikai, Yuan Shifu, and Yuan Shitong, all secondary sons (*shuchu*). In the Chinese tradition, the lineal son enjoyed unchallenged privileges; the secondary sons were often denied the same. Within the Yuan family, this created inescapable strife between Yuan Shikai and his elder brother Yuan Shidun. For instance, when Yuan Shikai's birth mother died in 1902, Yuan Shikai planned to bury her alongside his father according to a respectful and deferential ritual. These plans were emphatically rejected

by Yuan Shidun, who insisted that since Yuan Shikai's mother was a concubine, she did not deserve such a magnificent burial. This enraged Yuan Shikai, who even though he was at that time governor general of Zhili Province had to find another cemetery for his deceased mother. This incident deeply wounded Yuan Shikai, who never again returned to his hometown.

Another life-altering episode from his childhood occurred when he was adopted by his uncle at a young age. His uncle Yuan Baoqing, a *juren* holder, had married three women: his wife Lady Niu as well as two concubines – Lady Wang and Lady Chen. Lady Niu gave birth to two sons and two daughters, but the two sons died soon after birth. The other two women added three more daughters to this family. Thus at the age of forty, Yuan Baoqing, was still without a male descendant. When Yuan Shikai was born, his mother Lady Liu lacked milk to feed him, while Lady Niu's milk was profuse, for her son had just passed away. Thus, Yuan Shikai was actually breastfed by Lady Niu, with whom he formed an inseparable attachment. When Yuan Shikai was five, Yuan Baoqing asked his brother Yuan Baozhong, a father of six sons, to allow him to adopt Yuan Shikai. Seeing that his brother had five daughters without a single son, Yuan Baozhong gracefully agreed. Henceforth, Yuan Shikai became Yuan Baoqing's adopted son and lived from that time forward with him and his family.

This adoption not only transferred Yuan Shikai from his father's home to his uncle's but also changed his life path. As mentioned, Yuan Baoqing had five daughters, two from Lady Niu, two from Lady Wang, and one from Lady Chen.²⁶ Thereafter, Yuan Shikai lived among a large group of women, including three mothers and five sisters. Naturally, he was greatly spoiled by those ladies and developed an overbearing character with a sense of superiority over all others. Nevertheless, Yuan Shikai would maintain cordial relations with his sisters and would often inquire about their well-being when he was far from home.²⁷ After he left his hometown, he wrote many letters to family members. In particular, his correspondence with his second-eldest sister Yuan Rang was well-known. Growing up in this traditional clan, Yuan Shikai learned to be filial and was devoted to both his adopted parents and his birth parents. His personal writings would reveal his concerns about his two mothers after his two fathers passed away. When he was governor of Shandong, he invited his birth mother to live with him, as Lady Niu, his foster mother, had passed away a few years earlier.²⁸

Perhaps the second eldest sister's experience best shows the inner workings of the Yuan clan. Yuan Rang, Yuan Baoqing's second daughter, was engaged to Mr. Mao of a prominent family in Wuzhi County, Henan Province. Unfortunately, Mr. Mao died before their formal marriage, when she was only seventeen years old. Yet at a specially arranged wedding ceremony, Yuan Rang held the name plaque of her deceased fiancé and "married" into the Mao house as "a bride," for which she was acclaimed by the Imperial Court as a virtuous woman.²⁹ After living in the Mao household for a number of years, she returned to Xiangcheng at Yuan Shikai's request to take care of their mothers and young sisters while Yuan Shikai was far from home pursuing a political career. Yuan Rang never married again and lived as a virgin "widow." She was lauded by Yuan Shikai as "a legendary woman of prestige and virtue." He once vowed to her that he would write a biography on her behalf in order "to retain her great deeds as a model for future generations to emulate and to keep her glorious name in eternal fame."³⁰

CONCLUSION

Yuan Shikai's family illustrates the transformation of a historically agrarian family into a rising prominent bureaucratic landlord clan. This clan retained the basic features of a traditional family, such as strong kinship affinity, extended familial bonds, shared ethical values, and social elevation through the Civil Service Examination System. As with many other successful degree-holding families, many sons of the Yuan family came to occupy official positions, became managers of government affairs, and in private life became business people and land speculators. The clan's extensive social network laid a solid foundation that would benefit Yuan Shikai's career in the decades to come.

A careful survey of Yuan Shikai's birth and early life in such an elite family reveals a number of important factors that deeply impacted him. His natal status as a concubine's child estranged him from his elder brother, who was the son of his father's principal wife. Ultimately, this also changed his own nuptial tie with his future wife. His birth in a turbulent decade meant that he witnessed a bloody civil war (in terms of deaths, part of the largest conflict in the world during the nineteenth century) and turned him into a daring man and an audacious politician. More importantly, his adoption into his uncle's family redirected him onto a new life path. As a male clan member, it was his duty to carry on

the family tradition and to fulfill his responsibility to produce more children; this culturally justifies why he married ten women and produced thirty-two children. Ultimately, the Yuan clan proved to be an advantage to Yuan Shikai, because it offered him an opportunity to be nurtured in the Chinese classics, and because its vast social network opened the way to more favourable social relations in his upcoming career.

2

The Early Years

Ever since the failure of his inglorious attempt to found a new imperial dynasty, twentieth-century Chinese literature has portrayed Yuan Shikai as an amoral sybarite throughout his life and especially during his early years. Of course, this involved distorting the facts and mingling them with rumours. Fortunately, some reliable sources, such as Yuan Shikai's own writings (including his private correspondence), help us piece together his youth and trace his trajectory through the turbulent decades of the Taiping and Nian Rebellions.

Yuan Shikai's formative years can be sketched from the time he accompanied his foster father, Yuan Baoqing, to Jinan, Shandong Province, in 1866, to his return to Henan Province soon after his foster father's death in 1873, and beyond that to his enlistment in the army in 1881. During those fifteen years, Yuan travelled in many provinces and lived in different places. A careful survey reveals that several factors deeply impacted his youth. As the only boy in his foster father's family, Yuan Shikai was spoiled, and this dampened his motivation to achieve lofty scholarly goals. He was hyperactive and could not concentrate on learning. Furthermore, post-Taiping instability, the capriciousness of society, and frequent natural disasters added unpredictability and shook his young life. After the Taiping Rebellion, late Qing society was unstable, and this pressed young Yuan to apply his talents to handling family affairs and participating in communal management. In many ways, those years shaped his personality and determined his life's path.

THE ITINERANT YEARS

Adoption into his uncle's family dramatically changed Yuan Shikai's life. In 1866, when he was only seven, Yuan accompanied his foster father to live in Jinan, Shandong Province, where Yuan Baoqing had been assigned an official post. It was traditional imperial policy to require officials to work in a province not their own; this was known as the Attendance of Avoidance, purporting to prevent nepotism and abuses of power. It was this tradition that brought Yuan to Shandong for several years and then Jiangsu for another five. According to one record, young Yuan possessed superior mental agility and excelled in analysis and comprehension.¹ As a *juren* holder, his foster father understood the importance of nurturing young Yuan in the classics, and to that end he hired another *juren* holder, Wang Zhiqing, as his private tutor.

Following tradition, Yuan was exposed to the Confucian classics. His tutor integrated scholarly learning with sightseeing tours, such as visits to historical sites and beauty spots, including Daming Lake and Tiegong Temple in Jinan. Tiegong Temple was dedicated to Tie Xuan (1366–1406), who had defended his emperor to the death; for this, his family had been severely punished by the new monarch during the early Ming dynasty. On hearing this tragic story, Yuan Shikai wept bitterly. This episode counters the allegation that Yuan Shikai was a satanic presence from the very beginning. His tutor Wang Zhiqing was amazed by young Yuan's response to popular dramas: his pupil loved watching plays about filial sons but covered his eyes to hide from stage spectacles about devils and demons.² Through his travels as a young boy to cultural sites and his visits to plays, Yuan acquired knowledge of Confucian tenets.

Finding his tutor too strict and demanding, Yuan Shikai began to raise mischief. According to one account, the naughty and hyperactive boy

caught several hundred fireflies, held them in his hands, and waited for his teacher by the roadside at night. As his tutor was approaching, he crushed the fireflies into powder, and applied it onto his face, which glittered brightly. Suddenly, he jumped into the middle of the road. His tutor saw a strange face, suspected it was a ghost, was awfully scared, and ran crazily away. After returning to his home, Yuan's tutor was sick for about a month before he could resume his normal life.

This widely circulated story displays Yuan's difficult, irrepressible nature. Because of this incident, he was spanked. Nevertheless, his tutor Wang Zhiqing resigned, leaving young Yuan's education to his foster mother. Much to her satisfaction, under her guidance, Yuan Shikai started to read *The Four Books* and *The Five Classics* and was able to recite many verses from them.³

Yuan's life after Jinan has been interpreted controversially and in many different ways. In 1868, his foster father was transferred to Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, to a new official post, and the whole family was relocated. On the way to Nanjing, Yuan Shikai was invited to stay in Huai'an for a while by Zhang Rumei, who very much enjoyed his company.⁴ Long afterwards, Zhang became the governor of Shandong, shortly before Yuan Shikai took the same job on the eve of the Boxer Uprising. In 1868, Yuan also went to Yangzhou to stay with Zhang Liangji's family for a while. Zhang, the military governor of Yunnan and Guizhou, thought Yuan was talented and allowed him to study with his sons. Rumour has it that Yuan Shikai abetted Zhang's third son in cheating his parents out of money so that the two could spend time with a prostitute in a brothel.⁵ This is questionable, given that Yuan Shikai was less than ten years old at the time. Yet the story, purporting to show Yuan's evil nature, was widely circulated for a century.⁶

The next five years in Nanjing, from 1868 to 1873, were controversial ones, and the various accounts of Yuan Shikai from that time conflict with one another. After a decade of brutal war against the Taipings, Nanjing had begun to recover its former vibrant urban life. According to one source, as the son of a high-ranking official (Yuan Baoqing was the Jiangnan Salt Superintendent), Yuan Shikai became a dandy. When he found himself unable to concentrate on scholarly learning, he often visited nearby scenic locations. His tutor Qu Zhao, who excelled in both literature and the martial arts, taught him military skills, including boxing, swordsmanship, and riding. As a result, Yuan became physically sturdy. At the young age of twelve, he was able to ride wild horses with bravery and dexterity.⁷

Of course, he had to continue learning the classics, and he began to compose essays and poems. Some of his surviving poems display his aspirations and ambitions; he wrote once that "I want to open wide my gigantic mouth and swallow the barbarian king in just one mouthful." In another poem he allegorized himself as a legendary bird possessing magic power that "once the feathers become fully fledged ... will fly over the earth to rescue the entire world."⁸ His poems were neither elegant nor

artistic – they lacked rhymes and were deficient in essential lyric elements. Nevertheless, they exhibited Yuan's audacious ambition and spirited dreams.

While in Nanjing, Yuan Shikai experienced unexpected events during which he showed courage and a cool head. For example, in the summer of 1870, when he was a little over ten years old, Ma Xinyi, the governor general of Liangjiang, was assassinated. Ma was Yuan's foster father's benefactor, and his assassination badly frightened the Yuans. To this day it remains an unsolved case, but most scholars today believe it was the result of a clash between the Hunan Army led by Zeng Guofan and the Anhui Army led by Li Hongzhang. To solve the case, Zeng Guofan travelled to Nanjing, where his arrival led to a heated confrontation. Fortunately, the case did not spark further conflict and quickly faded from history. During those terrifying days, Yuan Baoqing often travelled to handle related issues. It is said that when faced with this critical situation, young Yuan Shikai "was in charge of his family affairs and he displayed competence and dexterity, for which he was applauded by his family and relatives." He guarded his family bravely, as if there was nothing to fear.⁹

It is fair to say that Yuan Shikai continued to pursue a classical education in Nanjing and that his family hired tutors to that end. Besides Qu Zhao, the family employed other teachers, such as Shen Tianyi. Thirty years later, in 1909, when he heard about Shen Tianyi's death, Yuan Shikai was saddened and transferred four hundred dollars from his own pocket to finance his teacher's reburial.¹⁰ He also wrote a letter to an official in Nanjing who was a personal friend, asking him to assist the Shen family. From this episode we can glean that Yuan Shikai stayed on good terms with his teachers and that he did not forget this special teacher–student tie even decades later. It is interesting that even in 1909, he referred to Shen as "my professional tutor" (*yeshi*).¹¹ (The word "professional" in this context referred to classical learning.)

It is likely inaccurate to assert (as some writers do) that Yuan Shikai, while in Nanjing, was a playboy who frequented brothels. A lad of twelve or thirteen might well rebel against his parents and disobey his teachers. He could well have been sexually attracted to women by then, but he had not yet reached full maturity and could not simply indulge himself in such a salacious life. Therefore, the lewd stories about his prurient conduct cannot be truthful. The tales that paint him as a licentious fop, an impious pleasure seeker, and a lustful womanizer might reflect traits that developed later on, but they cannot be totally accurate for this point in his life. This is not to suggest that that he did *not* visit

brothels – only that evidence is required for verification. Perhaps Yuan Shikai's daughter's comments are more appropriate about his life there: "He was extremely smart, but did not like to focus on learning. He often played around, boxing, horse-riding, playing chess, and gambling ... He developed a conduct which could be called 'negligence of rightful duties' [*buwuzhengye*]." ¹²

FAILING THE CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATION

Yuan Shikai was mischievous; even so, during his migration from Jinan to Nanjing he was well coached by good instructors and became familiar with the classics. In 1873, however, when he was fourteen, he encountered another sharp setback when his foster father suddenly died of the plague in Nanjing. Suffering from this new bereavement, Yuan was ill for a few months. The memorial service was arranged by the state and presided over by Liu Mingchuan (1836–96), later the first governor of the newly established province of Taiwan, and Wu Changqing (1829–84), a famous Anhui Army general. The death of his foster father was a heavy blow to him. His bright prospects as the son of a prominent official were shattered. As the only male in his family, he returned to Xiangcheng along with his foster mother, his secondary mothers (his foster father's concubines), and his sisters, and buried his foster father there. After this, he started to help manage family affairs, hiring farmers to till land, renting land out for revenue, building annexes to existing houses, and coordinating among his family members. ¹³

Yuan Shikai's main goal at this time – as it was for all sons of his age from elite families – was to pass the Civil Service Examination in order to receive a degree and become a government official. For the next five years, from 1874 to 1879, he devoted most of his time to this intensive preparation. Fortunately, his uncles Yuan Baoheng and Yuan Baoling, two high-ranking officials in Beijing, brought him to the imperial capital and hired several famous scholars to tutor him. Among them were prominent scholars, such as Xie Tingxuan, a *juren*, who taught him creative writing, Zhou Wenpu, a *juren*, who instructed him in poetry, and Zhang Xingbing, a *jinshi*, who tutored him in calligraphy. ¹⁴ Yuan Shikai was immersed in this milieu and became well-versed in the Confucian classics. Many sources claim that he could recite from the classics, for he had a superb memory. The years in Beijing were a valuable learning experience for him, and his two uncles played a significant role in his

education. Indeed, it was they who directed young Yuan Shikai towards the right path.

In his long-term pursuit of learning and his preparation for the examination, we find no evidence that he was an indolent and good-for-nothing playboy. Under the direct supervision of his two uncles and with prudent tutoring by first-rate teachers, Yuan studied diligently, often confining himself to his private study. Perhaps his son Yuan Kewen's claim that "he was fond of learning"¹⁵ refers to his determination and his zeal while he was in Beijing. According to another source, "he did not even take a break in his learning as he labored without distinguishing between daytime and nighttime. For a while, he only slept for about two to three hours in a whole day." This led his uncles to worry about his excessive zeal, and they advised him to pay attention to his health. When his birth father died, his uncles refused to let him return to Xiangcheng to attend the funeral because they wanted him to focus on his studies.¹⁶ Yuan naturally made great progress in such an intensive training program, and he could recite any part of the Confucian classics, compose decent poems, and offer insightful remarks. Since Yuan Baoling often supervised him, his testimony is likely the most reliable: "Shikai after all is a middle upper talent ... It is a comfort to see that the Yuan family will beget a good successor in him."¹⁷ Because of Yuan Shikai's progress in learning the classics, Yuan Baoling was confident that he would pass the upcoming examination.

After many years of painstaking preparation, Yuan took two examinations in 1876 and 1879. Unfortunately, he failed both of them. It is unclear which two examinations he took. One author claims that he took the examination in 1876 for the first degree of *xiucaì*. According to the rules in place at the time, a candidate had to take three tests for this first degree: a county test, a prefectural test, and an academy test. Yuan passed the first two but not the third.¹⁸ An unverified assertion, repeated by biographer Wang Zhonghe, states that Yuan achieved the highest scores on all three tests, but the examiner, Qu Hongji (1850–1918), deliberately flunked all candidates from Yuan's prefecture because Qu was not well respected there.¹⁹ Another account has it that Yuan circumvented the first round of tests and went straight to the provincial examination for the *juren* degree. This means that he would have purchased the title of *jiansheng* (equivalent to *xiucaì* status), which made him eligible to move on to the provincial-level examination.²⁰ In either examination, whether at county or provincial level, only 1 to 3 percent of examinees were successful. Many candidates scored a success at the first level only after repeating it for decades; for example, the famous writer Pu Songling (1640–1715) failed the county

examination nine times and never earned the first degree. Kang Youwei (1858–1927) took the provincial examination many times and earned the *juren* degree at the age of thirty-five. Thus Yuan's failure was not a fiasco, for the system allowed only a tiny percentage of the most talented among the huge pool to pass.

A question naturally arises: Why did Yuan fail? There are several reasons. First of all, he was not a brilliant intellect, though he was a talented manager of routine affairs. In private letters, his uncles mentioned his middling intelligence, and his foster father once bluntly labelled him "slow-witted," although conceding that he was very teachable.²¹ Second, Yuan's hyperactivity impeded his scholarly pursuits. In a letter to his birth father, Yuan Baoling remarked that "Shikai's intelligence was not the highest, because he was extremely hyperactive"²² – an indication that Yuan's hyperactivity had impacted his learning. Third, during the five years from 1873 to 1878, three of Yuan's father figures died: his foster father, his own birth father, and his uncle Yuan Baoheng; all passed away in their fifties. These bereavements inevitably impacted his emotional state and thus his learning. After his birth father died, Yuan Shikai vomited blood and suffered from a serious throat pain for months. Fourth, Yuan Shikai's health was not excellent – he often mentioned his illnesses in private letters. Fifth, it is possible that his marriage in 1876 weakened his concentration on learning. Sixth, Yuan's calligraphy tended to be sloppily pedestrian, and this would inevitably have affected his test score. Examiners placed great stock in artistic and attractive calligraphy, and Yuan's was mediocre. Seventh, Yuan's full calendar, which included helping stricken areas before his second examination and organizing literary societies after his first examination, consumed much of his time. Eighth, Yuan liked to read broadly, even though his focus needed to be on the classics. For example, in Beijing he enjoyed reading military classics and assorted essays. According to one source, "he practiced poetry and learned the Confucian classics during the daytime, but he explored military books during the evening."²³

Yuan Shikai did prepare for the two examinations. Especially after his first failure, he felt deeply humiliated and vowed to succeed on the next exam. In his private correspondence, he stated that "I have no face to return home without success ... The next examination is approaching. Without a success, I'll have no face to see people, even no face to meet my own wife ... If I do not succeed, I'll have no face to return home."²⁴ With this heavy burden in mind, Yuan studied hard. Unfortunately, the number of successful candidates who passed the examination was so tiny

that it would not have been unusual had he retaken it many times before finally passing. Yet he took it just twice, and as it turned out, he failed both times.

A NEW PATH

Whether Yuan Shikai bypassed the county-level examination and took the provincial examination directly in 1876 is open to further exploration. If he took the provincial examination first, it means that he purchased the qualification of *xiucaai* and avoided those three arduous tests. This purchase may seem dishonest, but the purchase-of-rank system (*juanna*) was perfectly legal and in fact had long been a core component of the imperial bureaucracy; every imperial dynasty adopted it as part of the normal functions of imperial administration. More importantly, this system generated a great deal of revenue for the government. For example, between 1821 and 1850 the Qing dynasty raised more than 34 million silver dollars through the sale of qualifications.²⁵ More importantly, the system allowed many disgruntled intellectuals to satisfy their vanity and find a job in government. Many degree holders endorsed such purchases because of the unpredictable and competitive nature of the examinations.²⁶ Furthermore, to purchase a title or rank a candidate had to be recommended by local elites and approved by the authorities. After the purchase, a person could skip a certain level of examination and move on to a higher one. Or he might land an official job if an opportunity became available. It is reasonable to assume that Yuan Shikai took the examination in 1879 for *ju ren*, which indicates that he took the same examination three years before and that he might have purchased the first degree status so that he could participate directly in the provincial-level examination.

Yuan Shikai failed both examinations; even so, he had developed his competitive abilities and acquired knowledge. He might have been a mediocre scholar, but he was mentally agile, he excelled in assigned tasks, and he displayed outstanding leadership skills. In the 1870s, he used money he had inherited to sponsor the founding of two literary associations, the Beautiful Pond Mountain House (*lizeshanfang*) and the No Cheating Mountain House (*wuqishanfang*). He appointed himself the manager of both associations. He invited interested scholars for seminars, lectures, discussions, and group studies, providing food and lodging for all participants. Among those who joined him were Yan Rucheng, Ren Zhennan, Qian Songyun, and Gao Jingqi. Gao later became the Civilian

Affairs Administrator of Shandong Province. The two associations helped local intellectuals pass the Civil Service Examination and become social elites. More importantly, they provided Yuan with an opportunity to demonstrate his abilities as a leader and manager. His talent and reputation attracted the attention of Wu Chongxi (1838–1918), the prefectural governor, who praised him for his generosity and often invited him to local social and political gatherings.²⁷

Yuan Shikai further displayed his first-rate managerial skills during disaster relief efforts in Henan Province in 1877 and 1878, at a time when Henan was suffering from an unprecedented drought. His uncle Yuan Baoheng had been assigned by the Imperial Court to handle relief efforts. Yuan Shikai accompanied him and was often dispatched to investigate related cases. “It was a cold winter and he rode on the horseback in ice and snow. His face and skin were chapped but he never relaxed in his work.” Unfortunately, his uncle died while on duty during the early summer of 1877. Yuan Shikai continued to assist Henan provincial governor Tu Zongying (1812–94) in enforcing alleviative measures and helped him punish officials who embezzled relief funds. For his efforts, provincial officials offered him \$300 per month as an award, but Yuan rebuffed them, maintaining that his uncle had provided funds to support them both during the relief efforts and that if he accepted their offer it would tarnish his late uncle’s legacy. In 1879, in another natural disaster fundraising operation, Yuan helped collect a large sum from his hometown, for which he was rewarded with a scholarly title, “Secretary of the Secretariat” (*zhongshukezhongshu*), equivalent to *juren* status. This time, Yuan accepted. This suggests that Yuan Shikai had purchased the *xiucai* title but was conferred the higher status of *juren* for his contributions to provincial relief activities. This *juren* status proved to be crucial for his future political career, in that it served as a springboard for promotion.²⁸

During these years, Yuan Shikai began to push his way into the upper class; he became acquainted with high-ranking officials and befriended local elites. From those elites he learned more administrative skills and came to understand more about social relationships. Besides the governor of Henan and other local administrators, Yuan met the imperial minister Mao Changxi (1817–82), Hubei military general Cheng Wenbing (1833–1926), and grand scholar Duan Qingchuan (1812–93). He also became close friends with Xu Shichang (1855–1939), future president of the Republic of China. Yuan’s wisdom, eloquence, and quick wit impressed all of them. According to Xu Shichang, he was immediately struck by Yuan’s grandeur and hospitality; even more striking was Yuan’s erudition

with regard to national affairs.²⁹ Duan Qingchuan, who was over eighty years old when he met Yuan, was so amazed by Yuan's extraordinary qualities that he stared at him for a moment and then predicted that he would have a bright future.³⁰

During the disaster relief campaign, Yuan Shikai observed people's suffering and witnessed mass unrest; these things prompted him to ponder ways to strengthen collective welfare, communal security, and social stability. The drought had affected Henan throughout 1878, resulting in nightmarish situations. In some areas, according to Yuan, "grandson killed grandmother and young brother killed older brother in order to sell their flesh for money and for food." More worrisome to him was the social predicament: in just a few months bandits proliferated and roamed everywhere. Some locals organized armed rebellions against government troops. When imperial reinforcements arrived, it was often hungry civilians who were victimized. In light of this catastrophe, Yuan vowed that he would "dedicate [his] loyal heart and ... mortal body to serving the country."³¹ Yuan's exposure to people's suffering prompted him to care about their well-being. He was not one to shut himself off from the real world.

The most catastrophic event for him was his failure in his second examination in 1879, which caused him great frustration. He told his family he was embarrassed at the failure and that all he could do was vent his anger and display his regret in front of the hall of ancestors.³² He married in 1876 and the following year begat his first son, Yuan Keding, who would prove to be a great comfort to him. However, his emotional estrangement from his wife only heightened his anguish, which reached a climax in 1881, when he burned to ashes a chest full of the poems and essays he had composed over the years. He declared: "A great man should devote himself to the country and fight on the battlefield in order to pacify people from the inside and expel invaders from the outside. How could I confine myself for so long between the writing brush and the ink slab? How wasteful is it, if I continue to do so?"³³ With this solemn declaration, Yuan decided to join the army to seek a different path than scholarship.

After wandering for a while, Yuan Shikai in 1881 joined Wu Changqing's army, which was stationed in Dengzhou, Shandong. Whether Yuan went to Guangdong before he arrived in Shandong is uncertain, but some scholars contend he did not.³⁴ Many argue that Yuan first travelled to Shanghai and then north to Dengzhou. Others assert that he first went to Tianjin and then to Dengzhou.³⁵ Wu Changqing was a sworn brother of

Yuan's foster father and treated Yuan Shikai like his own son. Wu intended to help Yuan pass the examination, and to that end he invited two famous scholars, Zhang Jian and Zhou Jialu, to be Yuan's tutors. Wu also paid Yuan a first-class military salary, which was the highest military wage among his soldiers. In Wu's own words, he extended Yuan such favourable privileges because he wanted to return what he owed Yuan Baoqing.³⁶

Under Zhang Jian's tutorship, Yuan made progress, but his essays, according to Zhang, lacked a pleasing flavour, were quite verbose, tended to be disorganized, and flowed roughly. Zhang had a hard time tutoring Yuan; he did, however, notice his pupil's extraordinary managerial skills: Yuan carried out his assignments efficiently and in a timely manner – indeed, he carried out all tasks in a neat, orderly way. When Zhang asked Yuan about his plans, Yuan answered solemnly:

My family has land to till, so I came here not just for basic subsistence. I saw China being invaded by foreign powers ... I assumed that Mr. Wu was serious about his sublime duty to defend the coastal areas here and needed some assistants in such a time of national crisis. Unexpectedly, upon meeting Mr. Wu, I saw that he was more a gentle scholar who does not intend to fight in battles. For these reasons, I may not be willing to stay here for long.³⁷

Even while expressing his patriotism, Yuan did not forget the Civil Service Examination. He wrote to his brother in 1882: "I will die with an everlasting regret if I cannot earn a *juren* degree."³⁸ But he never had a chance to take another examination. Three months after composing this letter, he accompanied Wu Changqing to Korea, where he would stay for more than a decade.

CONCLUSION

Yuan Shikai's early years were full of long journeys, unpredictability, and sadness and burdened by several failures. As the son of an elite family, he enjoyed privileges and a solid education. His early years were full of troubles, yet he did not drift, and he was diligent about pursuing a degree. His travels in many provinces broadened his horizons, his diligent study of the classics made him knowledgeable, and his participation in social activities familiarized him with people's suffering and social problems. Having sifted facts from diverse sources, we can say that Yuan was a

hyperactive young man, which negatively affected his learning. This is part of the reason why he failed two attempts at the Civil Service Examination and had to seek a new path in life. We can also say that young Yuan demonstrated considerable administrative talents that would prove crucial to his political future.

Young Yuan's love of martial arts, his passion for military books, and his enthusiasm for national defence drew him to soldiering. However, the army was not as he had imagined. It disappointed him that the army was poorly paid and fed and suffered from deteriorating discipline, wicked habits, poor morale, and internal strife. He once complained that "with the whole year's pay, it is impossible for me to pay for a round trip back home for a visit."³⁹ Perhaps all these problems prompted him to seek ways to modernize China's military; perhaps he viewed military reform as a task that would make the best use of his talents. While at the Dengzhou garrison, Yuan Shikai continued to dream of retaking an examination. However, events on the Korean Peninsula, where he would live for the next twelve years, would completely change the course of his life.

3

Imperial Commissioner in Korea

Domestic troubles in Korea would mould Yuan Shikai's personal life and future in dramatic and unexpected ways. For Yuan, Korea was a unique opportunity that would serve as a springboard for his political ascendancy. After his failure to pass the Civil Service Examination, the army presented a viable option for climbing the ladder of officialdom. Yuan would do so skilfully, rising from fresh recruit to high-ranking imperial commissioner. In Korea he would make a name for himself, rising with lightning speed from anonymous failure to national and, later, international figure.

Yuan's twelve years in Korea can be divided roughly into two distinct periods. From 1882 to 1885, he was a soldier and then an officer. His brilliant performance and his resoluteness earned him fame and promotion. Then from 1885 to 1894, he was an imperial commissioner working on behalf of the Qing Empire to strengthen Korea's traditional tributary tie to China. During this decade he would take an active role in shaping a new Sino-Korean relationship. In that capacity, and on many fronts, he would have to deal with powerful adversary nations, communicate with Korean rulers, carry out Qing diplomatic procedures, and enforce Qing imperial policies.

Yuan Shikai's decade-long commissionership is a controversial topic, one for which people from different perspectives have offered diverse views. For some Chinese, he was a young national hero who defended Qing imperial interests and upheld the traditional tributary tie;¹ for other Chinese, Yuan was a supporter of Qing imperialism who tried to

dominate Korea's politics, economy, and diplomacy;² still other Chinese blamed his overbearing management of Korea for international conflicts that would soon arise, beginning with the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95.³ In the view of some Koreans, Yuan represented imperial oppression and his support of the old tributary system impeded Korea's modernization.⁴ Indeed, Yuan was present in Korea at a time when the international situation was complicated, and his activities remain a "most sensitive issue."⁵ The Japanese, another important player in Korea, recognized Yuan's talent but loathed him for his constant resistance to Japan's ambitions. The Japanese would try to shift blame for the ensuing events onto Yuan. Indeed, Yuan's activities in Korea offer a compelling perspective from which to view the delicate situation there in regard to China, Japan, and Russia.

AN UNFLINCHING WARRIOR

Yuan Shikai's activities in Korea brought about a major change in the traditional Sino-Korean tributary relationship. For more than a millennium, the Imperial Court of China had received regular tribute from the Korean king, who acknowledged the Chinese emperor as his titular ruler. The Korean king sent missions to deliver tribute to the Chinese emperor, who in turn bestowed gifts, granted titles, offered protection, and maintained imperial hegemony. Nonetheless, Korea remained autonomous, and China seldom interfered in its internal affairs. The dramatic change in the tributary tie in the late nineteenth century was caused by a multitude of factors. First, China had lost many traditional tributary states, such as Vietnam, Burma, and the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa), to foreign powers (France, Britain, and Japan); second, Korea's weakness and its proximity to China's political heartland in an age of foreign imperialism required China to pay particular attention to that kingdom; third, Japanese and Russian intrusions into Korea jolted the Qing into responding; fourth, after a decade of modernization, the Qing Empire was able to use its newly available resources to enforce stronger policies in Korea; and finally, internal instability in Korea prompted the Korean king to seek China's help. As a result, in 1882, Qing China changed its long-held non-intervention policy and began penetrating Korea as if it were a traditional imperialist power.

It was internal turmoil in Korea that drew China into the peninsula's affairs. The Yi dynasty (1392–1910), which had ruled the country for

centuries, faced several crises in the late nineteenth century. In 1863, the king died without an heir and his relative's son became the new monarch, known as King Kojong. The new king was only twelve years old, so his father, Yi Haung, served as Taewon'gun, or regent. Kojong's marriage changed this situation, for his consort Queen Min was a talented woman who injected herself deeply into politics. When the Taewon'gun retired in 1873, King Kojong began to handle state affairs. Two prominent factions soon took shape: the Min Clique and the Taewon'gun Clique. They clashed over issues, for the Taewon'gun was a conservative isolationist whereas Queen Min initially leaned towards Japan, which was supplying advisers to help modernize the Korean army. The Taewon'gun was shaken by his loss of power and looked for ways to get it back. In July 1882 the traditional forces of the Korean military, who resented the modernization efforts, staged a mutiny in coordination with the Taewon'gun. They murdered Queen Min's officials, slaughtered the Japanese military instructors, and besieged the royal palace. The soldiers even attacked and razed the Japanese legation. Japanese envoy Hanabusa Yoshitada (1842–1917) fled to Inchon and then returned to Japan. This was the Imo Mutiny (Imo referring to the year 1882).

China's response was swift. As soon as Japanese sailors arrived in Korea in early August, the Qing Empire dispatched troops at Korea's request. The Chinese forces were commanded by Wu Changqing. The reason for this, according to one interpretation, was that Wu's garrison was "the closest to the destination."⁶ Indeed, it was not a long journey from Dengzhou to Inchon. In mid-August, Wu Changqing's six battalions, three thousand troops in all, arrived in Korea. Among them was twenty-three-year-old Yuan Shikai. For Yuan, that autumn offered another opportunity to take the Civil Service Examination, but the mutiny in Korea shattered that hope. Wu Changqing was given only seven days to depart with his force from Dengzhou. During the rushed preparations, Yuan's excellent administrative ability drew Wu's attention.⁷ He was assigned to the staff for front management, where it would be his duty to arrange logistics, reconnoitre marching routes, and handle disciplinary issues. On the battleship bound for Korea, Yuan met Kim Yong-sik, a Korean official, who had come to China seeking help. Kim recorded his first meeting with Yuan in his diary. He regretted that Yuan's hair was turning grey so young but viewed him as "an easy-going man who shocked me with his familiarity with Korea and his profound insights into it."⁸

As Wu Changqing's army approached the Korean coast, Wu decided to land at night and launch a surprise attack. One of his subordinates

complained that the soldiers had fallen ill after a tiring journey and requested a delay. Wu angrily dismissed him and replaced him with Yuan Shikai. According to one source, Yuan and the two hundred soldiers under his command reconnoitred along the coast for a mile until they found an ideal place for the landing. Because the beach sand was laced with sharp stones, Yuan cut his feet badly, but he ignored it. Ding Ruchang, who accompanied Yuan, joked to him: "How could a noble boy like you bear such hardship!"⁹ Yuan's reconnaissance helped bring about a safe landing for Wu's forces and guaranteed the ensuing military success.

Yuan Shikai's choice of landing site and other actions contributed to Wu's success in suppressing the mutiny. Wu's battalions had been the backbone of the Anhui Army during the suppression of the Taiping Uprising, but nearly two decades of peace had eroded its fighting spirit. Even worse, discipline was a serious problem; the troops had grown arrogant and disrespectful. Upon landing in Korea, some soldiers harassed the locals, raped Korean women, and seized their valuables, which in Wu's eyes was utterly shameful behaviour. Yuan pointed out to his commander that any breaches of the rules would bring disgrace to the empire, tarnish imperial glory, and foster scornful disrespect.¹⁰ Wu empowered Yuan to enforce discipline. With Wu's approval, Yuan ordered the public execution of a few wrongdoers and made sure that Koreans heard about it. Yuan personally investigated a number of cases and issued declarations that strict discipline would be enforced. His strictness towards the soldiers, his merciless prosecution of their crimes, and the swift punishments he meted out established him as an honourable, righteous man, for which he won praise from both Chinese and Koreans. However, his resort to capital punishment angered some soldiers and won for him the notorious title "the executioner" (*zhuanshansharen*).¹¹

Since the Taewon'gun was responsible for the mutiny, the Qing government decided to detain him as Kim Yong-sik had suggested, in order "to retain the king in power."¹² In this action, Yuan Shikai played a decisive role. According to the plan, Wu Changqing visited the Taewon'gun on August 25, 1882. Two days later, Wu invited him back to his headquarters. When he arrived, Yuan Shikai prevented his bodyguards from following him, refusing them admittance with the excuse that the talks were top secret. Thanks to this, the Taewon'gun was detained, sent under virtual arrest to a Chinese battleship along the coast, and transported to Tianjin. From there, the Taewon'gun was relocated to Baoding, in Zhili (Hebei), where he was held for about three years.

Yuan Shikai also participated in the military action to arrest the Taewon'gun's followers and suppress the mutinous Korean soldiers. Having lost their leader, the mutineers soon surrendered to Qing troops. Yuan sometimes "took personal command of his troops, rushing to disputed areas to fight the rebels." It was summer, and the rain was falling heavily. Yuan's "quilt and clothes became thoroughly wet, and he could not go to sleep. He had to sit through sleepless nights. Consequently, he became sick and ran a high fever." This was Yuan's first military experience, and his bravery won him renown. Wu Changqing praised him: "He unyieldingly disciplined the troops and commanded them with skill. He was always the first soldier to fight the rebels and engaged in battles with unusual valor."¹³ Li Hongzhang spoke highly of Yuan: "He commanded troops strictly and fought against enemies dexterously." On Li's recommendation, the Qing government in late 1882 promoted Yuan to Fifth Rank official.¹⁴

After the mutiny, the Qing troops remained in Korea, where Yuan played a unique role in strengthening the Sino-Korean tie. He served as an officer in Wu Changqing's army; simultaneously, he participated in Korean political affairs. Yuan understood the strategic importance of the Sino-Korean tie, remarking that "Korea is the front gate of China and its loss would endanger the latter." Yuan believed that to strengthen itself, Korea needed to train a strong army.¹⁵ With the approval of the Qing government, Wu appointed Yuan to train a Korean army. Since weapons and supplies would be provided mainly by China, the Korean king happily endorsed this plan. Yuan personally selected one thousand men from among two thousand Korean candidates and organized them into two battalions. Yuan himself wrote the training manual. One year later, another battalion was added. The three Korean battalions, 1,500 soldiers in all, symbolized the military progress of Korea, but it also represented China's penetration. With this, Yuan established a reputation among the Koreans as a talented military commander.

Yuan Shikai was then assigned direct command of one Qing battalion. In early 1884, he also supervised the remaining three Qing battalions in Korea, after Wu Changqing was ordered to station another three Qing battalions in Fengtian (Liaoning) in northeastern China. At the same time, Yuan was appointed steward (*huiban*) of the Korean issue. This promotion was arranged by Li Hongzhang and supported by Wu Changqing. The commanders of the other two Qing battalions in Korea, Wu Zhaoyou and Zhang Guangqian, were much higher in rank; nevertheless, it was Yuan who became the most powerful military and diplomatic

representative for the Qing Empire. Yuan spared no time enforcing discipline on his troops. His public announcements made it clear that he would show no lenience to violators. He warned his soldiers that they would be punished severely for harassing the locals. He also prohibited direct commercial transactions between his troops and the Koreans, while advising the Koreans not to swindle his troops.¹⁶

Those who had loyally followed Wu Changqing for decades envied Yuan for his promotion and outstanding performance. Yuan, of course, was neither modest nor humble, and his ambition and audacity sowed animosity. Zhang Jian, once his tutor in the army, wrote that Yuan “does not endeavor to learn but to pursue fame with all his might.” To Zhang’s disappointment, Yuan “privately socializes with the chief minister Li Hongzhang, calls for an extreme reorganization of the army, and always shows off his talent.”¹⁷ When Yuan began using his official title in 1884, Zhang Jian, Zhu Mingpan, and Zhang Cha wrote Yuan a three-thousand-word letter of condemnation. In it they mocked him for his quick promotion from raw recruit to high commander within just three years and lamented their past support for him. They accused him of being “obstinate, self-centred, arrogant, and disdainful. He exasperated and disappointed officers and he seriously upset the soldiers.” In their view, Yuan’s “haughtiness and pretension have exceeded the moral limit.” The three admonished Yuan “not to view others as dumb fools and not to consider others as feeble-minded imbeciles. Rather, be honest and correct yourself.”¹⁸

Instead of responding to this sharp censure, Yuan focused on his duties. His significant role in suppressing the Kapsin Coup of 1884 further boosted his political career. He closely monitored Korea’s political factions and noted the changing situation at the royal court. The pro-Qing faction, known as the Serving Big Principle Party (*Sadaedang*), had been pushed aside, and the pro-Japanese faction, known as the Enlightenment Party (*Kaehwadang*), had become powerful. Most of the *Kaehwadang* leaders, such as Kim Ok-gyun, Hong Yeong-sik, Soo Jae-pil, and Seo Gwang-bum, had been inspired by the rapid modernization of Meiji Japan and desired to emulate it. They tried to persuade King Kojong to follow their advice and seek Japan’s support. These moves rattled Yuan. In a secret report to Li Hongzhang he wrote that “the Korean king and his ministers are manipulated by the Japanese ... and want to distance themselves from China.”¹⁹

What made the situation worse was that Japan had obtained the right to station troops in the name of protecting its legation, according to the

treaty signed with Korea after the Imo Mutiny. As a result, the Japanese had stationed troops in Seoul and Inchon. The *Kaehwadang* politicians were working secretly with the Japanese. Their reform program sounded progressive, but their approach was not peaceful – they were conspiring to murder conservative leaders, seize power, and compel reforms. By late 1884 the political struggle between the *Kaehwadang*, supported by Japan, and the *Sadaedang*, supported by China, had intensified. Yuan Shikai, who was sensitive to such developments, made note of the imminent danger and ordered his troops “not to untie their uniforms and not to take off their shoes during the nighttime as if during wartime.”²⁰ In the meantime, he ordered the collection of intelligence and vigilantly watched the other side’s moves.

The *Kaehwadang* scheme was planned as follows: they would create a commotion at a public celebration, occupy the royal palace, kidnap the king with the help of Japanese soldiers, and organize a new government. The plot was carried out as planned. On December 4, 1884, the director of the post office, Hong Yeong-sik, a *Kaehwadang* member, invited foreign dignitaries and Korean officials to a banquet at the new building. The foreign diplomats and Korean officials arrived on schedule. Kim Ok-gyun then ordered his men to ignite a blaze to cause turmoil. The conservative military commander, Min Yong-ik, was immediately assaulted and seriously wounded. Taking advantage of the chaos, Kim Ok-gyun at the head of his men rushed into the royal palace and forced the king to call for help from Japanese soldiers, who arrived immediately. Kim compelled the king to summon the conservative ministers, who were murdered one by one as they entered the royal palace. The coup eliminated almost all of the *Sadaedang* leaders. The next day, Kim declared the formation of a new government, in which his men occupied important posts. On the third day, he issued new policies in King Kojong’s name.

Yuan had perceived the danger, but he had not expected the coup to be launched so soon or so violently. After hearing what had happened in the post office building, he immediately led two hundred Qing soldiers there, but he found the building empty. From there, he went to the customs office to meet Min Yong-ik, who told him what had happened. Yuan then went to the royal palace, where he found the gate shut tight. So he returned to his garrison and discussed the situation with Wu Zhaoyou and Zhang Guangqian, the commanders of the other two battalions. Together they dispatched an urgent telegraph to Li Hongzhang asking for instructions and requesting that Li send more troops to Korea.

Unfortunately, they would have to wait a few days for Li's reply. At this critical moment, Yuan proposed taking action to save the king and to defend the Qing government's position in Korea. Wu and Zhang were reluctant to act without orders. Only after Yuan told them he would take responsibility did the other two agree to cooperate. Wu led the left wing and Zhang the right wing, with Yuan in charge of the central approach to the palace.

It is interesting to note Yuan's actions on December 6, 1884: While Wu and Zhang held back on the two flanks, Yuan commanded his battalion to enter the palace. According to one testimony, Japanese soldiers fired the first shots and inflicted casualties on Yuan's troops. Even as his soldiers were falling on all sides, Yuan refused to withdraw.²¹ On a nearby slope, a shell exploded, wounding him, but he continued his advance. Yuan's valour inspired his soldiers. Seeing that the Korean army he had trained was fighting for the other side, he called out for them to defect; heeding his call, hundreds of them surrendered. Seeing that they were about to lose, the Japanese minister Takazoe Shinichiro and Kim Ok-gyun withdrew to the Japanese legation. Yuan ordered his troops to locate the king, who went to stay with Yuan in his garrison. On December 7, according to Yuan, Takazoe burned the legation and fled to Inchon. The three-day coup thus ended in failure.

From one perspective, the coup represented the clash between China and Japan. Because of Yuan Shikai's resolve, China won out. Without his steadfastness, Korea might have become a Japanese colony one decade earlier than it did. According to Chinese scholars, Yuan's audacity delayed the Japanese conquest of Korea. Korean scholars, however, contend that Yuan's actions and his subsequent moves delayed Korea's modernization. His actions had helped the royal court survive the crisis, but they had also boosted the conservative faction. Whatever its impact, the 1884 coup was an important event in both Korean and East Asian history, and Yuan had played an important role in its suppression.

The events that followed the coup demonstrated Yuan Shikai's adroitness in handling foreign affairs. When Japanese minister Takazoe fled, the Japanese left family members and relatives behind. "To show China's magnanimity," Yuan told Li Hongzhang, he "dispatched an officer along with twenty soldiers to escort the abandoned Japanese family members to Inchon."²² Meanwhile, Yuan wrote a letter to Takazoe, stating that he had sent the Japanese military dependents to Inchon to join their families with the intention of "proving that we always treat our neighbors reasonably and act according to our conscience."²³ Takazoe, however, blamed

Yuan for his “provocation” and asked the Japanese government to punish Yuan. During the subsequent diplomatic negotiations, Ito Hirobumi, the Japanese plenipotentiary and one of the leading Meiji oligarchs, requested that Li Hongzhang penalize Yuan. Li, however, would only promise that he would verbally rebuke Yuan. Japanese hatred towards Yuan seemed to intensify from that time on.

Those who were grateful to Yuan Shikai included King Kojong, Queen Min, and her followers. Immediately after the coup, the king invited Yuan to live in the royal palace for a time. Yuan’s room was just one wall away from the king’s room. The two men discussed important issues on a daily basis. Yuan seems to have become the king’s confidant. Seeing the close tie, Yuan proposed to Li Hongzhang that the Chinese government use the opportunity to establish a *de facto* protectorate over Korea: “It would be best for the Qing Empire to take advantage of Korean gratefulness to send a special envoy as the supervisor to command Korea’s troops, manage its internal affairs, and handle its diplomacy on the behalf of the king.”²⁴ This proposal, which would have greatly expanded the traditional tributary tie, was not accepted by Li; that said, it reveals Yuan’s political acumen as well as his loyalty to the Qing court, both of which were appreciated by Li.

Success, however, was soon overshadowed by sharp internal and external criticism. The Japanese had requested Yuan’s removal, and in addition to this, some Qing officials excoriated Yuan for mobilizing troops without orders. Wu Zhaoyou and Zhang Guangqian zealously attacked Yuan for “abusing” his authority and for “embezzling” military funds, which Yuan had used to compensate the fallen Korean soldiers. To pacify the Qing troops, Yuan was ordered to give the money back. Soon, two high-ranking officials, Wu Dacheng and Xu Chang, were sent to Korea to investigate Yuan’s behaviour.²⁵ Wu and Xu did not recommend punishment; instead, they spoke highly of Yuan. Yuan now requested permission to leave Korea. Approval having been granted, he departed on January 31, 1885, and returned to his home province of Henan. What further saddened him was that the Treaty of Tianjin, signed on April 19, 1885, between China and Japan, specified that both countries would withdraw their troops from Korea and that both were to notify each other if any military personnel were dispatched to Korea in the future. This meant that Japan had the right to send troops to Korea if China did so. During the negotiations, Ito Hirobumi pressed for Yuan’s punishment, but he was defended vehemently by Li Hongzhang.²⁶

THE HAUGHTY COMMISSIONER

Yuan Shikai assumed three different identities in Korea between 1882 and 1894. First, he was a soldier and an officer in Wu Changqing's army from late 1882 to early 1885. After that he was a special envoy escorting the Taewon'gun back to Korea during a three-week mission in October 1885. Finally he was an imperial commissioner under Li Hongzhang, stationed in Korea for nine years. His three identities demonstrated the rapidly changing situation in Korea and the Qing's gradually more assertive involvement. Each of those identities developed in tandem with Yuan's promotions and underscored his dedication to Qing imperial rule.

The Qing machinations in Korea could be seen as spontaneous responses to the changing international situation. However, the Qing lacked a clear long-term goal in Korea, except to maintain the tributary tie. During the Imo Mutiny the Qing had detained the Taewon'gun and supported the Min Clique. After the mutiny the Mins drew closer to China. As soon as the 1884 coup had ended, the pro-Japanese politicians temporarily abandoned the field, but at this point the Min Clique began collaborating with Russia, which was attempting to penetrate Korea. To address this new development, Li Hongzhang sent the Taewon'gun back to his country to balance the intricate power structure. The task of escorting the Taewon'gun back home fell to Yuan Shikai. For three weeks, from October 3 to October 24, 1885, Yuan accompanied the Taewon'gun on his return to Korea. At first, Queen Min compelled King Kojong not to meet the Taewon'gun, but Yuan's persuasion convinced the king to welcome his father back. In this task, Yuan displayed his talent for handling one of the toughest political issues of the day.

During his short stay in Korea, Yuan Shikai wasted no time advising the king to keep his distance from Russia. On October 10, 1885, he wrote an essay titled "On the Removal of Treachery" [*Zhaijianlun*] to highlight the notion that "China and Korea are inseparable as both are mutually dependent for coexistence. Without Korea, there would be no China." In the essay, he told the king that Russia harboured territorial ambitions and possibly had a plan for territorial annexation. Thus, Korea should work with China rather than with powers such as Russia.²⁷ The following day, Yuan met with King Kojong and advised him to be vigilant about Russian encroachment and to befriend China, with which Korea had long-standing ties.²⁸ Even so, the return of the Taewon'gun pained the Min Clique, and the situation only grew worse after Queen Min angrily ordered the execution of three of the Taewon'gun's old subordinates during those weeks.²⁹ It is

hard to assess whether the Qing were right to release the Taewon'gun, who after all had been virtually kidnapped by Chinese authorities in 1882, but it is certain that Yuan's short mission to escort him was accomplished successfully.

A few days after his return from Korea, Yuan's life changed yet again: Li Hongzhang recommended him as a special commissioner to Korea. In his petition to the Imperial Court, Li spoke highly of Yuan: "he possesses valor and sagacity and excels in the overall situation management ... he is wise and resourceful." On October 30, 1885, the Qing approved Li's request that Yuan be appointed as "the resident commissioner in Korea to handle negotiation, commerce, and other matters" (*Zhuzhachaoxian-zonglijiaoshetongshangshiyi*), a long title for his special mission, for which he was promoted to Third Rank official.³⁰ Several weeks after receiving the appointment, Yuan was in Seoul again. He would live there for nine more years, until the summer of 1894.

Yuan's duties were not sharply defined; indeed, they were as vague as the traditional Sino-Korean tributary tie itself. His calling card referred to him as "His Imperial Majesty's Commissioner,"³¹ and on many occasions he was recognized as the Chinese Imperial Resident, yet he was not a colonial officer, like the British governor general in India. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, China did not dispatch a single commissioner to Korea, although it had during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), which established a "supervisor" position there. Before Yuan Shikai, the Qing had appointed Chen Shutang, a Yale graduate, as a commercial representative for three years (1882–85). Chen was an honest but often irresolute man. Yuan had been sent to replace him but had been given more responsibilities besides (as indicated by his title), which included negotiating duties far beyond Chen's commercial duties. Overall, however, Yuan's responsibilities were not explicitly defined.

The lack of clear limits to his power meant that Yuan could act freely as he set out to intervene in Korea's politics and economy. Yuan's overbearing behaviour in this regard generated criticism. Some labelled him "the actual executive of Korea" (*zhizhengzhe*);³² some called him "the overlord" (*taishanghuang*);³³ others called him "the *de facto* king of Korea";³⁴ and still others regarded him as a "staunch, traditional imperialist" (*chuantongdiguozhuyizhe*).³⁵ And some even contend that Yuan "controlled and manipulated Korea's domestic and foreign affairs."³⁶ All these charges are somewhat hyperbolic and exaggerate his actions, but they all contain a kernel of truth. Obviously, the question at hand is this: What did Yuan Shikai actually *do* in Korea?

Politically, what Yuan Shikai did was defend the existing tributary tie. He did not plan to destroy Korean autonomy, nor did he endeavour to restore old conventions or try to create a new system. Rather, he adopted a strategy of persuasion and sometimes coercion to achieve his goals. Yuan never intervened directly in the Korean administration. Instead, his reports to Li Hongzhang were full of worries about Korea's centrifugal tendencies. He often cautioned King Kojong not to waver from his special relationship with China. In his "Petition to the Korean King" he reiterated the importance of mutual coexistence. "Korea to China is like the east wall to the central yard. If the east wall collapses, the central yard in the middle inevitably will be exposed to outside threats." Since "both countries had co-existed for several hundred years ... both should unite and trust each other."³⁷ In another private meeting with King Kojong, Yuan pointed out that Korea faced a crisis and told the king that the only way "to fend off foreign invasion ... was to get closer to China."³⁸

Noting that Korea was being strongly impacted by foreign influence since its opening to Japan and the Western powers, Yuan wrote an essay titled "On Korea's Situation." In it he stated that Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of land, population, revenue, and military power. Fortunately, as a huge country and a neighbour, China had always taken care of Korea. He told the Koreans that the traditional relationship should be preserved. He listed six benefits of this tributary tie: China offered military protection, generous aid, respect for Korea's internal autonomy, assurance of long-term stability, absence of territorial ambition, and the future benefits of mutual trust. He also pointed to four harms if Korea drifted away from China: a sudden change in the relationship would cause internal political struggle, the lack of protection would lead to foreign territorial claims, immediate foreign aid would dry up, and internal rebellion might take root.³⁹ Yuan was offering his advice to Korea in order that it could achieve the goals of prosperity and strength, which he felt could be realized under the tributary framework with China's patronage, protection, and paternalism.

From the existing primary sources, it is hard to find any evidence that Yuan Shikai controlled the Korean royal court. He worked with the Koreans through their Foreign Office, which was staffed mainly by pro-Chinese politicians such as Kim Yong-sik. It was through this channel that Yuan exerted influence by insisting on the tributary tie. Occasionally, he filed petitions directly with the king or communicated straightforwardly with other branches of the Korean government. Under his pressure, the

Korean court carried out its tributary duties by dispatching eleven tribute missions to visit the Qing Imperial Court in Beijing during the nine years of Yuan's commissionership.⁴⁰ The exchange of gifts, while largely ritualistic, symbolized the superior status of the Qing Empire, which was what Yuan and other Qing officials were actually pursuing.

Yuan Shikai was sensitive to any potential breaches of the traditional tributary tie by the Korean court, which he sometimes viewed as too perfunctory in carrying out its duties, intentionally or not. When Yuan heard that the Korean empress dowager Queen Cho was dying, he immediately sent a telegraph to Li Hongzhang to highlight how important it was for the Qing Imperial Court to dispatch a mourning envoy. According to Yuan, "the Korean king intends to pursue a self-autonomous identity and may not be willing to see China send such an envoy. For China, though, it is a good opportunity to underline the traditional tributary system and showcase it to other nations."⁴¹ When he received confirmation of the queen's death, he immediately dispatched a telegraph to Li Hongzhang; the following day he sent a letter of condolence to Korea's Foreign Office. Yuan cited various historical precedents in demonstrating that according to the tributary convention, the Imperial Court needed to send a high-ranking Manchu noble to attend the royal funeral and that the Korean king had to receive the envoy in a suburb of the capital. The Korean royal court had planned to eliminate this old practice. But at Yuan's insistence, King Kojong sent two officials to Beijing to invite the Manchu noble to the funeral. Two Manchu elites, Xu Chang and Chong Li, attended the funeral in Korea as Qing envoys. According to Yuan's report, "the two representatives did not take anything from Korea; instead, they bestowed a lot of gifts. As a result, the Koreans were very elated."⁴²

A further illustration of the tributary relationship between China and Korea is that Yuan Shikai had familiarized himself with Korean nationalist terminology. When the telegraph line between China and Korea was completed in 1888, Yuan was surprised to find that the envelopes and receipts were printed with the phrase "Great Korea." He immediately lodged a protest with Korea's Foreign Office requesting the removal of the character of "Great" in order to underscore Korea's tributary tie with China.⁴³ He was satisfied with the correction, but became so obsessed with this mission that he started to hunt down any use of it. In 1889, once again, the telegraph office in Pushan issued a similar title, but it was immediately stopped by Yuan.⁴⁴ In 1893, the Korean Mint circulated a coin with "Great Korea" on it. It was spotted by Yuan, who spared no time requesting a correction. After a shuttle of notes over a few days,

the Korean Foreign Office informed Yuan that the king had decided to remove the character “Great” from coins. Because of his protest, the mint was closed for days; it reopened only after the issue was settled.⁴⁵

Yuan Shikai was, in the end, merely a tool of the Qing Empire as it set out to strengthen and rebuild the traditional tributary tie. In particular, he was an instrument of Li Hongzhang, with whom he maintained a special relationship. During the nine years that Yuan was the commissioner, he dispatched reports on a weekly basis, including letters, telegrams, missives, and other documents. He often sent a number of long messages in just one day. All told, his reports to Li amounted to several million words. It is safe to say that Yuan faithfully enforced Li’s policies and directives. In ensuring that Korea met its tributary obligations, Yuan was acting as Li’s agent. He watched over the activities of other nationals, observed their ties with Korean elites, and reported any suspicious activities in a timely manner.⁴⁶ Regarding his performance, Li in 1890 commented that Yuan was “extremely loyal, sagaciously talented, administratively able, and instinctively brave in handling the most difficult issues.”⁴⁷ On Li’s recommendation, Yuan was promoted in 1893 to Second Rank official with a future assignment to govern Wenzhou and Chuzhou in Zhejiang Province. But Yuan never went to Zhejiang – he stayed in Korea to carry out Qing policies.

Korea’s rulers endeavoured to emphasize Korea’s “independence” and often disliked Yuan Shikai’s interference and Li Hongzhang’s interventionist policies. They were ambivalent towards China: on the one hand, they needed China’s protection and help; on the other, they resented its interventions, which seemed to bind them to the declining Qing Empire. In 1887, King Kojong dispatched two embassies overseas: one to the United States, the other to five European nations (Britain, Germany, France, Russia, and Italy). The mission to Europe failed, having been thwarted in Hong Kong due to British collaboration with China. The minister-counsellor to the United States was Park Ching-yang, whose departure was delayed by Yuan on the pretext that Park’s diplomatic status was higher than that of the Chinese envoy in the United States. Being a tributary state, Korea could only send a lower-ranking diplomat. Yuan was annoyed that the Korean government had not consulted him before making its decision.⁴⁸

Noting that Korea was determined to send Park to the United States, Li Hongzhang fashioned his ideas into the so-called Three Principles (*sanduan*), which Park was to follow while in America. First, Park was to report to the Chinese Embassy upon his arrival. Second, he was to

follow Chinese diplomats on diplomatic occasions. Third, he was to consult Chinese diplomats on important issues.⁴⁹ The Koreans having accepted these principles, Yuan agreed to allow Park to depart for Washington. But on arriving in the United States, Park refused to report to the Chinese Embassy and conducted his diplomatic activities directly. Yuan immediately lodged a protest, requesting that the king punish Park, and this forced Park to resign in 1888. King Kojong later planned to name Park Ching-yang the director of the Foreign Office; once again, Yuan blocked Park's appointment, this time on the basis of his supposed earlier misconduct. The Park Ching-yang Incident, which went on for four years, reveals Korea's desire for complete independence and demonstrates the Qing's stubbornness in defending the old tributary tie. It also shows the Qing's "dual diplomacy": it was submissive to strong powers but set out to dominate tributary states.⁵⁰ Clearly, the Chinese saw Korea as important to their national interests because of its strategic location.⁵¹

With regard to the economy, Yuan Shikai strove to take a firm hand over Korea's maritime commerce, which he claimed fell under the tributary relationship. The Korean customs office was established in late 1882; Paul Georg von Möllendorff, a German Sinologist, was appointed as its first administrator. On learning that von Möllendorff was cooperating with Russia, Yuan expelled him from his post. Subsequently, Henry Ferdinand Merrill, an American, assumed the position. In principle, all foreigners and staff working for the Korean customs office were subordinates of Robert Hart, who controlled the Chinese customs office. Thus the personnel decisions for Korean customs were subject to Yuan's recommendations. With Yuan as the commissioner, the Korean customs office and its employees were "under China's complete control."⁵² As foreign trade increased and revenues from tariffs rose, the Korean government wanted to take over the office, but it was barred from doing so by Yuan.

Yuan's efforts to monopolize Korea's foreign loans also indicate that he intended to strengthen the Sino-Korean tributary tie. Korea's financial situation was desperate – the Korean king was having to borrow money to pay off previous loans – and its government planned to arrange loans from other countries to make ends meet. However, such attempts were blocked by Yuan, who intended to sever Korea's economic ties with other countries and to derail the king's scheme to seize the customs revenue. The customs office was already under China's control, and Yuan did not want to lose that control. Regarding loans, Yuan asked Li Hongzhang to offer Korea low-interest loans to demonstrate China's leniency and

goodwill. Yuan claimed that the “more loans are offered, the more benefits they will bring to China.”⁵³ Every time China offered a low-interest loan, the Korean officials “expressed gratitude, exaggerated China’s prosperity, and offered thanks to China for its magnanimity.”⁵⁴ In Yuan’s view, “the longer the term of the loans, the longer China could maintain influence over Korea.”⁵⁵

An important aspect of Yuan’s efforts to strengthen China’s grip on Korea was his control over communications. In the late nineteenth century, the telegraph was in wide use, and Yuan tried to place a firm hand on Korea’s telegraph lines, both their construction and their administration. There were four telegraph lines to the capital: the Seoul-Nuiju line, the Seoul-Wonsan line, the Seoul-Pusan line, and the Pusan-Nagasaki line. China controlled all but the last of these: it had lent the Koreans money to construct them, and it dispatched staff to administer and operate them. More important than this, it held a twenty-five-year monopoly, during which time no other country would be permitted to involve itself in Korea’s telegraph business. China’s loans were largely interest-free, which on its face was a benefit to Korea. But at the same time, Yuan’s control over Korea’s communication links strengthened China’s long-term political and economic interests, even though the Seoul-Nuiju line made no profit and Yuan had to subsidize its operations.⁵⁶ While those lines were being built, Yuan emphatically rejected the involvement of other powers, especially Japan and Russia.⁵⁷ To say that China reaped an enormous profit would be an exaggeration; however, establishing control of communication links was a strategic move that strengthened the tributary tie.⁵⁸

As commissioner, Yuan Shikai worked tenaciously to further China’s commercial interests in Korea. Soon after his appointment, he was helping the Chinese establish commercial firms and arrange concession zones, while encouraging trade between the two countries – in particular, the sale of Chinese goods to Korea. In 1888, shipping lines were established between Shanghai/Yantai and Inchon to boost direct trade. As a result, Chinese merchants flocked to Korea’s treaty ports: their numbers rose from only 188 in 1885 to 2,182 by 1893.⁵⁹ This is reflected in a comparison of Japanese and Chinese imports entering Korea through Inchon: in 1885, China’s exports to Korea were only one-third of Japan’s; by 1893, China’s exports to Korea were greater than Japan’s.⁶⁰ Another marker of increasing Chinese commercial involvement in Korea is the merchants’ birthplaces. At first, most Chinese merchants in Korea were from coastal provinces like Shandong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang. By the early 1890s, merchants from

the interior provinces were arriving, in particular, from Yuan's own province of Henan.⁶¹

Yuan Shikai's commissionership reflected the Qing endeavour to dominate its tributary state, even as the empire itself encountered domestic troubles and international crises. The Korean Peninsula was of great strategic importance to China, and the Imperial Court empowered Yuan to implement its will. Yuan was resolute and strong-willed on China's behalf, and his provocative moves and high-handed arrogance often drew criticism from foreign legations and foreign employees. He infuriated the Americans and annoyed the Russians, and he was hated by the Japanese. After 1890, to highlight China's suzerainty over Korea, Yuan refused to attend routine diplomatic meetings held by the Korean Foreign Office; instead he sent an interpreter. The only country friendly to Yuan might have been Britain, given that British diplomats cooperated with Yuan in dealings with their shared rivals, especially Russia.

The Americans' anger at Yuan is clear in O.N. Denny's pamphlet *China and Korea*, published in 1888 in Shanghai. In it, Denny condemned Yuan for making Korea "a nation of helpless children" and for his attempts "to advise and even direct the [Korean] king in long but empty memorials, and, upon public and official occasions, to assume the role of host instead of guest, on the flimsy pretext that he is 'at home' in Korea." According to Denny, Yuan intended "to crush out the liberty of Korea."⁶² Denny, along with other foreigners, lobbied Li Hongzhang to withdraw Yuan from Korea. Their efforts were ignored: Li appreciated Yuan's dedication, cherished his talent, and valued his firm hand. In Li's view, Yuan was the best candidate for the position: he worked hard to further Qing interests, obtain more privileges for China, and defend Chinese security. This last was the overriding concern for Yuan and for many other Qing officials.

WAS YUAN SHIKAI FRAMED?

Yuan Shikai's commissionership did not end cleanly; rather, it ended during what for China was a disastrous war: the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, which altered the balance of power in East Asia and upended international relations in the region. China's defeat in that war and the subsequent colossal reparations it was required to pay were a national humiliation that would spur strong nationalism and have a long-term impact on the Chinese nation. In the ensuing finger-pointing, some influential officials blamed Yuan for the embarrassing loss. Liang Qichao condemned Yuan for his

egotism, arguing that his selfish ambition had led to the death of more than one hundred thousand Chinese soldiers and brought national shame to China.⁶³ Zhang Peilun accused Yuan of irresponsibility that had allowed the war to happen. Some scholars today still denounce Yuan for fomenting the conflict and then allowing the Japanese to exploit it.⁶⁴

But not everyone blames Yuan for causing the war. On the contrary, some have praised him for faithfully and stalwartly defending China's interests. "The Qing court and Li Hongzhang did not punish Yuan Shikai, because he did not make any mistakes."⁶⁵ More and more scholars are taking a broader historical perspective and arguing that the war was actually caused by Japan's long-term policy of expansion. "After ten years' military buildup and war preparations, Japan had accomplished its war plan and military arrangements against China. The only thing left was to find an excuse to begin the war." By 1894, Japan had found that excuse; thus it was Japan that should be seen as the initiator.⁶⁶ Looking back on the war a few decades later, Yuan Kewen defended his father and blamed Li Hongzhang for making poor decisions that led to China's defeat. He regretted that Li had ignored his father's advice, squandered opportunities, and, more tragically, failed to send troops to Korea quickly enough. According to Yuan Kewen, "Li was the person responsible for the colossal loss."⁶⁷

Consider that Yuan was a subordinate of Li Hongzhang, who employed him as an agent to implement his policies in Korea. According to some scholars, it was Li's policies, enforced by Yuan, that steered China into a collision with other countries, especially Japan. Yuan was defending China's tributary tie; Japan, in its quest for regional hegemony, denied Korea's subordination to the Qing Empire. Yuan set out to expand China's economic interests and to replace Japan as Korea's main investor, business partner, and economic patron, and he succeeded at both. Yuan had beaten the Japanese in 1882 and 1884, and the Japanese government meant to retaliate. Yuan's firm resolve had made China a dominant player in Korea; as a consequence, more and more Japanese had begun calling for a speedy conquest of Korea. By the early 1890s, a clash between China and Japan was inevitable.

Yet the principal questions remain: How did Yuan Shikai respond when faced with the menace of rising Japanese hegemony in Korea and indeed on the continent? Was he partly responsible for the collision between the two empires? As special commissioner for a decade, Yuan had laboured diligently for the Qing Empire. As a Chinese patriot, it was his wont to disparage Japan. In his telegrams, reports, and other writings he referred

to the Japanese as “the dwarfs” (*wo*), a denigrating term. Clearly, Yuan had not yet learned any lessons from Meiji Japan’s rapid and fairly thorough modernization, and he tended to dismiss Japan’s military strength. Furthermore, in Korea Yuan had adopted the strategy of expelling Japan (*quanmianpairi*).⁶⁸ Yuan’s assessment of Japan was hardly exclusive to him; indeed, it was widely shared among Qing officials before 1894. This error of perception is what led to China’s defeat, which shocked its vain-glorious mandarins.

Yuan Shikai disdained Japan’s military and underestimated it. He believed that “Japanese troops were weak at land battles ... thus we can annihilate them one by one without any trouble.”⁶⁹ His victory over the Japanese during the Kapsin Coup of 1884 confirmed for him that the Chinese were superior in battle, and this blinded him to the rapidly modernizing Japanese juggernaut. He did not know that Japan had adopted a comprehensive war plan against China and that its military, social, and political reforms were largely complete by 1890.⁷⁰ In one report to Li Hongzhang, Yuan claimed that “the Japanese have been endeavoring to improve themselves now and definitely will not gamble at the risk ruining the current peace.”⁷¹ On many occasions he insisted that Japan would not dare provoke hostilities, for it did not have the ability to do so. In 1894, just a few months before the war, Yuan still assumed that Japan would not start a war; he even refused to believe that Japan would dispatch troops to Korea.⁷² Yuan miscalculated the international situation in East Asia by underestimating Japan’s ability to launch a major war. More ominously, his misjudgment prompted him to downplay the changes taking place inside and outside Japan. Of course, Yuan was not alone in misreading the Japanese – most Qing officials (not to mention most world leaders) were wrong about Japan, which was quietly continuing to rise.

Yuan’s indirect involvement in the assassination of Kim Ok-gyun had infuriated the Japanese. For years, Yuan had watched closely as the Korean king developed plans to eliminate the 1884 coup conspirators, especially Kim Ok-gyun, who had fled to Japan. At first, Yuan refused to implicate himself.⁷³ But as rumours spread about Kim’s fresh plot to overthrow the Korean government, Yuan came to endorse the king’s plan. In March 1894, Kim was lured to Shanghai by a Korean assassin, and was killed there on March 28, 1894.⁷⁴ The Korean assassin was arrested and repatriated to Korea along with Kim’s corpse. The Korean court, controlled by the Min Clique, made plans to execute Kim’s corpse. Yuan tried to persuade the court not to mutilate the corpse in this way, which would only anger the Japanese.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the vengeful royal court did so on the

night of April 12, 1894. The assassination of Kim removed a threat, but it also cast an ominous shadow over Sino-Japanese relations, which were already tense. Yuan was never directly involved in Kim's death; even so, in the eyes of the Japanese, China had been the instigator. The assassination infuriated the Japanese public and pulled the Meiji oligarchs closer to war. The Japanese now wanted to drive the Chinese from Korea. In this light, the war that soon came can be seen as a political aftershock of the assassination.

The fuse that ignited the war between China and Japan was the Tonghak Rebellion of 1894, which provided the Japanese with an excuse to dispatch troops for the sake of protecting its legation. The Tonghak had existed within Korean society for decades as a syncretic and quasi-religious movement seeking to integrate Eastern philosophical tenets and religious faiths into one belief system. The Tonghak advocated social justice, called for the expulsion of foreign religions, and promoted the removal of repressive officials. In April 1894, Chon Pongjun (1854–95), a Tonghak leader, declared an uprising to address severe inequality, serious famine, harsh injustice, and religious persecution. Yuan's response was to suppress the rebellion, but he underestimated its momentum, assuming that the rebels were no more than a disorderly rabble. At one point he claimed that "those religious bandits were a mob which gathered together in a trice. They will disintegrate as soon as governmental troops arrive."⁷⁶ However, the rebels occupied more and more land and defeated the king's army. Faced with this turbulence, the Korean king asked the Qing Empire to send troops to suppress them.

Yuan Shikai underestimated how quickly the Tonghak Rebellion would expand; he also failed to predict that Japan would use the events as an opportunity to wage a major war. He had long assumed that the Japanese "focused on business and commerce without any other intentions."⁷⁷ He thought that Japan would take the same stance as other countries in maintaining peace and promoting trade.⁷⁸ When Japan sent troops to Korea, Yuan told Li Hongzhang that "Japan intends to save face. Their soldiers arrived not for war and please do not worry about it ... When the rebels are suppressed and Chinese soldiers withdraw, the Japanese automatically will withdraw."⁷⁹ He placed his trust in Japanese minister counsellor Otori Keisuke's assurances that the Japanese troops would withdraw at the same time as the Chinese troops.⁸⁰ He was naive enough to take Otori at his word that Japan would withdraw once the Tonghak Rebellion was over.

The rebellion was crushed in early June 1894, but contrary to Yuan's expectations, the Japanese now sent *more* troops to Korea. Only now,

at this critical moment, did Yuan begin to grasp Japan's real intentions. He repeatedly discussed the issue of military withdrawal with Japanese diplomats but received no positive response. On the contrary, in late June, Otori demanded that the Koreans immediately carry out political reforms. At the same time, Japan dispatched ten thousand more soldiers to Korea to occupy strategic locations.⁸¹ On June 29, under Japanese pressure, the Korean government declared its rejection of China's suzerainty and its relinquishment of the tributary tie. Otori planned to detain Yuan and then expel him.⁸² Only at this moment did Yuan ask Li Hongzhang to send more troops to Korea to defend China's interests, but by then it was too late. Tragically, Li did not listen to Yuan's plea. Li planned instead to ask the Great Powers to persuade Japan to withdraw from Korea. By delaying, Li had squandered the chance for China to send more troops in time to change the situation.

In Korea, Yuan Shikai faced a desperate situation. There were Japanese troops everywhere, the Chinese were being humiliated, and even Yuan's office had become a target for Japanese artillery. The shortage of daily necessities prompted his employees to sneak away until by mid-July only two or three remained. Yuan fell ill with worry. He told Li Hongzhang on July 14, 1894, that he "suddenly fell seriously ill ... dizzy, weak, and painful all over."⁸³ For a time, he said, his heart beat rapidly, his head became dizzy, and his body malfunctioned.⁸⁴ He asked Li repeatedly to allow him to return to China. Finally, on July 19, 1894, Li approved his return. Risking a high fever, Yuan immediately packed up, disguised himself as an ordinary civilian, dashed to Inchon, and boarded a ship to Tianjin. Thus ended his decade-long career in Korea.

Events now unfolded much as Yuan Shikai had feared. Within a week of his departure, Japan attacked a ship carrying Chinese troops across the Yellow Sea, thus raising the curtain on the First Sino-Japanese War. The Japanese attacked the Chinese troops in Korea; this was followed by a Chinese declaration of a war on August 1, 1894. Because the Japanese forces greatly outnumbered the Chinese in the Seoul area, the Chinese were routed there. The Japanese now invaded Chinese territory. The war was fought on land and sea, and China lost on all fronts. Yuan remained the commissioner in name, but he was also appointed quartermaster general and sent to Pyongyang to arrange logistics, transport weapons to the front, and gather together the scattered Chinese soldiers.⁸⁵ On September 9, 1894, Yuan left Shanhaiguan for Korea but was unable to reach Pyongyang. When he reached Shenyang, he heard that Qing troops had been beaten and had fled to the interior. Yuan was compelled to relocate his

headquarters many times because of Japanese advances. From the existing documents, we can see that Yuan carried out his duties but was heartbroken that the retreating Qing troops were undisciplined and lacked fighting spirit. He lamented that “very few of our soldiers were able to fight.”⁸⁶

Yuan Shikai's comments on China's military failure were only partly accurate: during the war, many Chinese soldiers in fact fought bravely. Many of them were hailed as national heroes, such as Deng Shichang and Ding Ruchang, two naval commanders who sacrificed their lives in sea battles, and Zuo Baogui, who died in the Battle of Pyongyang. Many units fought until the last man. But neither was Yuan's description of China's failure totally false: many commanders, including Ye Zhichao, did desert their positions and flee for their lives. From his position behind the front line as quartermaster general, he witnessed Chinese troops fleeing with his own eyes. He knew that some of those troops were harassing civilians and behaving like bandits. In this chaotic situation, it was Yuan's task to organize them into new military units.

Seeing that Korea was totally lost and that Qing troops had been ousted from the peninsula, Yuan Shikai considered it pointless to retain his title as commissioner. On February 11, 1895, he petitioned Li Hongzhang to discharge him from his official posts, in particular from the commissionership. In his appeal, he argued that “urgent military affairs, the possible change of the tributary tie, and the stringent budget problem” were reasons to release him from his positions.⁸⁷ So Li discharged him from the commissionership, while retaining him as the logistics officer for the Chinese forces.⁸⁸ Yuan faithfully fulfilled his duties until the war was over. He was regarded as an outstanding officer by his superior Liu Kunyi, the imperial envoy who had replaced Li Hongzhang and taken charge of the war.⁸⁹

What disturbed Yuan Shikai most was the complete loss of all he had achieved. Once he left Korea, his office was empty; all his employees had departed or deserted. His acting commissioner, Tang Shaoyi, a future premier of the Republic of China, sought refuge in the British Legation after the war broke out. Chinese property was seized, Chinese assets were taken over, and Chinese valuables were confiscated. The Chinese merchants whom Yuan had lured to Korea over the years now became homeless and were bullied by the victors. As one witness stated, “the Chinese merchants tried to flee for their lives, and could not take care of their own possessions and belongings.” “Those who did not have an opportunity to escape were frightened, just like stray curs and vagrant puppies. In particular,

those who were stranded on the way home suffered the most.”⁹⁰ The Qing Empire was humiliated by the loss of its last tributary state and by its defeat at the hands of Japan, the rising regional hegemon. More disastrously, the defeat had harmed those innocent ordinary merchants whom Yuan had encouraged to come to Korea.

But most heartbreaking of all for Yuan was watching the rout of the Qing troops in Fengtian, where he laboured as quartermaster general. In Seoul, where the Japanese forces greatly outnumbered the Chinese, Japan's victory was inevitable. The Qing had a large number of troops in Fengtian, but in spite of that they were beaten in many battles. Faced with this desperate situation, Yuan pondered why China was losing the war. On December 21, 1894, he wrote that “Japan used Western methods to train its soldiers and to teach them to master Western military weapons. The Japanese emphasize military coordination, specify punishment and reward, and stress stern discipline ... We, on the contrary, did the opposite.” To strengthen China's military, he proposed recruiting several hundred youths, inviting foreign instructors, and opening military schools to train them.⁹¹ According to Yuan, the crucial factor in China's military disaster was China's failure – out of sheer ignorance – to modernize its military. The urgent task, as he saw it, was to train a modern army to defend the country.

CONCLUSION

Yuan Shikai's presence in Korea for more than a decade did much to shape his own life – indeed, it did much to shape modern East Asia. Regarding the former, Korea launched his political career, for it was there that he rose rapidly from raw recruit to high-ranking imperial official.⁹² With regard to modern East Asia, his Korean decade was a time of international power struggles over the peninsula, in the course of which Yuan set out to defend Qing imperial interests, strengthen Qing power, and fend off encroaching powers. In this international milieu, Yuan's bravery, wisdom, patriotism, and resolve enabled him to climb the ladder of imperial officialdom. Yuan's political rise differed from that of most Chinese officials. Having failed the Civil Service Examination, he joined the army; using his family connections, he found a secure niche; and using proper channels and opportunities, he rose in rank. His military actions in 1882 and 1884 proved his valour, his quick thinking, and his ability to act under pressure. All of this helped him build a reputation and paved the way for his quick promotion.

His nine-year commissionership can be viewed from a variety of angles. He was seen as a competent but also arrogant administrator. He worked diligently for the Qing imperial enterprise and wasted no time expanding Qing political influence and strengthening Qing commercial gains. Yuan can be seen as an agent of traditional imperialism owing to his tenacious defence of the tributary tie. However, not all agree with this view. Some scholars argue that Yuan “tied Korea with the entirety of China in order to share a common fate, which is not necessarily imperialistic” (*daguo-zhuyi*).⁹³ Seen in this light, Yuan’s presence in Korea was China’s spontaneous response to the invasion of other powers. In any case, nobody can deny that Yuan was sometimes crude in his behaviour.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Yuan was responsible for the outbreak of the First Sino-Japanese War. He was, after all, an instrument of Li Hongzhang and faithfully carried out the latter’s plans and policies. Yuan did of course make mistakes: he misread Japan’s motives, underestimated its military strength, and was blind to its expansionist ambitions. Also, he did not pay attention soon enough to the momentum of the Tonghak Rebellion, and as a result, the situation escalated into a full-scale Japanese invasion. The subsequent treaty signed in Shimonoseki was a humiliating catastrophe for China: Taiwan was ceded to Japan, and China was compelled to pay two hundred million taels of silver in reparations. Naturally, the Chinese blamed Li Hongzhang and Yuan Shikai. Yet recent studies point to a new interpretation. One scholar contends anyone in Yuan’s position would have been vulnerable to Japanese encroachment. The striking fact is that Yuan’s resolute, daring, and rigorous actions “effectively contained Russian penetration into Korea and postponed Japanese conquest by more than ten years.”⁹⁴

4

Training the First Modern Army

The defeat of China by Japan during the Sino-Japanese War ignited national outrage among the Chinese, who were furious that their vast empire had been beaten by a small island nation. After their defeat in that war, they saw their country as threatened with extinction, and this prompted them to seek a new approach to modernization. The loss of territory to Japan and the colossal reparations were regarded as national humiliations. Given that the defeat had largely been a military one, many Chinese, including Yuan Shikai, began to reflect on China's existing military system and offer suggestions for reforming it. They recognized that the Chinese army had fallen badly behind other national military forces, and they pushed for a military reorganization to defend the country from further invasions. This urgent call offered Yuan a new opportunity, in the form of an appointment to train the empire's first modern army.

In Xiaozhan near the city of Tianjin, Yuan Shikai would wrestle for more than three years with the realities of military modernization. Breaking from the restraints of the old military system, he pursued a series of ambitious projects with the goal of modernizing the army and thereby strengthening the declining Qing Empire. Buoyed by official support, financed by the state, and empowered by the Imperial Court, Yuan made a number of serious attempts at military reform by emulating, borrowing from, and adapting the materials, education, discipline, and practices of the most advanced armies in the world. We should not exaggerate Yuan's endeavours, for he only commanded around seven thousand troops. Yet those men would form the nucleus of a modern, trained officer corps

and army that could be expanded as needed. And those men would be personally loyal to their commandant (in much the same way that officers of the Nationalist army would feel personal loyalty to the commandant of the Whampoa Military Academy in the mid-1920s). The three years in Xiaozhan would serve as a springboard for Yuan and provide “a vital ladder for [him] to climb towards his ultimate political peak.”¹

Few scholars have devoted attention to Yuan’s time at Xiaozhan. This may be because his modernization efforts there counter his long-held image as a villain. This is not to say that scholars have not examined his time there. In fact, anyone who studies modern Chinese history cannot avoid his years at Xiaozhan. However, accounts of those years have been oversimplified. Some have touched lightly on Yuan’s military program but emphasize how he opportunistically used this modern army to build a power base. Some see his reform work as an attempt to turn the army into a personal tool, a “private army.” Still others condemn his feudal approach to building a loyal force. This chapter explores Yuan’s appointment to the Qing military modernization project, his efforts to upgrade China’s military program, and his creation of a special politico-military group.

YUAN’S MISSION AS A MILITARY REFORMER

The question naturally arises: Why did the Qing emperor appoint Yuan Shikai as the commander in 1895 to train China’s first modern army? At that time, China had a population of four hundred million people, and there were many talented people who could have done the job. The fact that Yuan had not earned a scholarly degree barred him from many official positions. Indeed, Yuan’s case poses a conundrum. Many scholars have speculated about this, and each resulting interpretation no doubt has its own logic, but uncovering the historical truth still requires evidence. At the same time that Yuan was being demonized, his mission of military training sparked speculative thought. One prevalent theory is that he obtained his position by bribing influential political figures at the Imperial Court;² one writer states plainly that Yuan “used bribes” to lobby Ronglu, Li Hongzao, Li Lianying, and other Manchu nobles for their support.³ The possibility of bribery cannot be discounted, but neither can it be proven. It is true that bribery was prevalent during the Qing Empire, but it was not conducted openly. If Yuan offered bribes, it is almost impossible to ascertain how big they were or when he paid them. Bribery is, after all,

undetectable by definition, and this poses a challenge to verification. If he did resort to bribes, he would have to have done so secretly and at the right time in the decision-making process. If that was the case, his bribes produced a discernible benefit.

One widely circulated story that has attached itself to Yuan's promotion to military leader in 1895 asserts that his promotion was significantly aided by the Japanese politician Ito Hirobumi.⁴ During the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki in April 1895, Ito asked Li Hongzhang about Yuan's whereabouts. On hearing that Yuan was serving as a minor official, Ito sighed that Yuan was a rare talent and regretted that he was not being treated properly.⁵ The enemy's "recommendation" might well have been rejected by Chinese politicians as a basis for their own decision making; yet Ito's favourable assessment did reflect a positive view of Yuan beyond China's borders. The conversation between Li and Ito was recorded by Li's secretary and later released to the public. Consequently, it was claimed to be a factor in Yuan's promotion. It is reasonable to question Ito's recognition of Yuan as an endorsement given that China had just been defeated by Japan; at the same time, Ito's praise for Yuan *could* have swung public opinion in China, since Yuan had sparred with Japan for more than a decade in Korea, where he had amply displayed his talents. Although Ito's compliment was not a formal recommendation, it might well have had an impact on Yuan's domestic reputation.

One factor in Yuan's appointment was the recommendation made by court officials that he train the first modern army. Such officials could not simply lie about a candidate's qualifications, although they might have their own preferences. First, they had to carefully consider Yuan's qualifications. Various high-ranking officials – notably Li Hongzao, Yikuang, Changgeng, Weng Tonghe, and Wang Wenshao – presented their co-signed memorial on November 19, 1895, and sent another on December 8, 1895, to Emperor Guangxu. In these two petitions, they spoke highly of Yuan and recommended him for the job. In a separate memorial of December 1895 by Wang Wenshao, Grand Councillor of the Military Affairs Council (*junjichu*), Yuan was praised for his "honesty, bravery, military expertise, and high reputation in Korea," which explained why Wang preferred Yuan. Wang also expressed confidence in Yuan's future performance.⁶

Also petitioning the emperor on Yuan's behalf were provincial officials, including the governor general of Liangjiang, Liu Kunyi, and the governor general of Huguang Zhang Zhidong. Some of them had worked with Yuan; for example, Liu had been Yuan's superior during the war. Liu

had carefully observed Yuan's performance and thought highly of him, noting his bravery, reliability, accountability, competence, and disposition. His candid feelings about Yuan had nothing to do with blood ties; he focused entirely on Yuan's personal qualifications. According to Liu Kunyi, Yuan's fitness for this job was extraordinary:

Yuan is sagacious, brave, and knowledgeable. By nature, Yuan is loyal and honest. When he handles business, he always does it in an orderly manner. He definitely is one of the most outstanding officials ... We often lament the hardship in finding talent. Yet, it would be more pitiful if we have a man of talent but we do not use him properly while allowing him to waste his talent in trivial routines.⁷

In imperial China, the emperor's approval was the final endorsement for an official appointment, and Yuan's commission was authorized by Emperor Guangxu. The monarch was not a public figure, and it was rare that people met him directly. However, the training of a new modern army funded by the state was so important that the emperor gave priority to this matter. He knew that the Manchu banner troops were dysfunctional and that the Hunan Army and the Anhui Army had shown themselves to be impotent in modern warfare. So, it would be ideal if the Imperial Court could establish a new modern army. The issue was who would command it. Guangxu posited that the candidate must be able, loyal, and reliable. Noting Yuan's emphasis on his family's loyalty to the Imperial Court, he offered him a private meeting on August 2, 1895. During that meeting, Yuan was named as a staff member on the newly created Military Service Council to handle military issues, a post he held from August 3 to December 7, 1895. On December 8, 1895, the emperor formally appointed Yuan commander of the new army.⁸

The most important reason for Yuan's appointment had to do with his qualifications. Although he had not succeeded in the Civil Service Examination System, it was clear from his record in Korea that he was an able administrator, a skilful manager, and a cautious planner. More important was his training of the modern Korean army and his leading role in its organization, recruitment, training, and management. His victories over the Japanese in 1882 and 1884 enhanced his standing. His long commissionership in Korea defending Qing imperial interests had brought him international renown. Even during the failed 1894–95 war, during which he served as logistics officer, he outshone others in managerial skills. In a number of official documents, Yuan was evaluated highly by

his superiors, including Li Hongzhang and Liu Kunyi. Those two officials delighted in his achievements and believed he was qualified to command the newly organized army.

Another reason for Yuan's appointment was that Yuan had already thought systematically about modernizing the military. During the war, he had begun to reflect on China's continuing defeats and had proposed to Grand Councillor Li Hongzao that China's military needed reforming. During his meeting with Emperor Guangxu, he impressed the young monarch with his insightful ideas. Within three weeks of the meeting, on August 20, 1895, Yuan delivered a memorial to the emperor in which he laid out his blueprint for military reform. This memorial was not declassified for a long time and was only released recently.⁹ In this lengthy document – around 13,000 words – Yuan expressed his wide-ranging ideas on military reform, and did so with impressive insight.

Yuan was proposing a thorough transformation of the Chinese military. He traced the events of the Taiping Rebellion, highlighting the successes of the Hunan Army and the Anhui Army. However, he emphasized that those armies had since become dysfunctional and that China must train a new, Western-style army for national defence. This new army should be trained by German or other foreign instructors but must be under Qing control. It should be equipped with the most advanced weaponry as well as modern tools such as telephones and telescopes. Yuan also recommended that a navy be added without delay. All military forces should be under centralized control to avoid the failure that had occurred a year earlier.¹⁰ A brief examination of his ideas shows that his modernization basically meant Westernization; he intended to build a European-style military system.

The extent to which Yuan's reforms took root would depend on the procuring of well-trained military officers. He remarked straightforwardly that "a thousand troops are easily gathered yet one good commander is hard to obtain."¹¹ He criticized Qing officers for their lack of military knowledge, their pursuit of fame and profit, and their arrogance. Yuan suggested that officers should be selected mainly from military schools, where they must be trained in modern science, military theory, war tactics, and other useful skills. If possible, the state should send them to Western countries to learn about the modern military system. The officers, according to Yuan, should be young, healthy, educated, and honest. This meant that more military academies needed to be established.

In his memorial, Yuan underscored his ideas for training new soldiers. He recommended that a new, Western-style recruiting system be adopted. There should be basic requirements related to height, weight, capability, and age. Ideological indoctrination would turn the new recruits into loyal fighters for the empire and warriors dedicated to the nation; without it, the soldiers would be merely a motley band of rabble. The troops must act according to strict discipline, without which they could not achieve victory. Regular reviews of the enforcement of military discipline must be conducted. Violations should be punished, and exemplary soldiers must be rewarded. Yuan accentuated the link between good pay and fighting ability. To discourage embezzlement, Yuan came up with an idea of presenting payment to soldiers every month immediately after their military drills on the parade ground.¹²

His comprehensive plan to strengthen the nation by building a Western-style army fit well with the ruler's desire for China to recover from the recent war. Yuan's farsighted thoughts were not impractical; with the state's support they could be realized step by step. The emperor, the empress dowager, and other officials were all impressed by his ideas. Yuan's appointment to train the new army was based in part on his systematic elucidation of the national situation and his creative ideas for training a modern army. Between August 2 and December 8, 1895, a group of high-ranking officials presented their recommendations to the emperor, who approved Yuan as the commander. An elated Yuan arrived in Xiaozhan on December 16, 1895, to start his new life as "the father" of China's first modern army.

THE TRAINING OF A NEW ARMY

The selection of Xiaozhan as a military base was not Yuan Shikai's decision, although it is usually linked to his name because that is where he trained China's first modern military force. Xiaozhan, about twenty miles south of Tianjin, was first chosen as a military base by the Anhui Army in 1871, largely because it was close to the capital. The Anhui Army trained its troops and built offices and residential areas there. That army was destroyed during the Sino-Japanese War after being routed at Dandong near the Korean border. In late 1895, Xiaozhan was serving as the training ground for Hu Yufen's "Determined Martial Army" (*dingwujun*), which would form the nucleus of Yuan's future army. As soon as Yuan took over as

commander, he changed the name of the 4,750-man nucleus to “the Newly Established Army” (*xinjianlujun*).

It is sad to note that it took the rout of Chinese armies during the recent war for the nation to finally break the stranglehold of the traditional military system – an indication of China’s cultural conservativeness. The job of building a modern army fell on Yuan’s shoulders. Although Hu Yufen had trained this army briefly, he was an old official (once the governor of Yunnan Province) and had not made many significant changes to the traditional system, in which the basic unit was the battalion. This old system did not allow for large-scale or nationwide coordination; this had been a factor in China’s recent defeat. To remedy this, Yuan built a completely new system that followed the Western model. Under the battalion (*ying*), the force was reorganized into companies (*dui*), platoons (*shao*), and squads (*peng*). The new system also left room for the future establishment of regiments (*biao*), brigades (*xie*), and divisions (*zhen*). On the face of it, Yuan’s new system was a duplication of the German military model. Yuan’s headquarters included several departments and two bureaux, all similar to the German military command structure.¹³ To achieve multi-functionality, he reorganized the new army into the following specialized units: infantry, cavalry, engineers, transportation, and artillery.

Given Germany’s military success in the late nineteenth century in its three wars of national unification, and given its victories over other European countries, it is no surprise that Yuan invited German military instructors to Xiaozhan to assist him. He recognized the Germans’ military superiority and intended to carry out his reforms accordingly. In fact, Chinese military leaders in general were fascinated with the Germans’ apparent invincibility and endeavoured to learn from them. For example, Zhang Zhidong, who was training his “Self-Strengthening Army” (*zhiqiangjun*) at the same time, also hired Germans as instructors. The striking difference was that Yuan did not hand over the military commandship to foreign instructors as Zhang did. Instead, according to his contracts, a dozen foreign instructors would be supervised and administered by Yuan. It was Yuan who would make the final decision to raise or reduce their salaries depending on performance. Of course, the foreign instructors were paid well – each received at least three hundred silver taels per month, many times higher than the salary paid to a Chinese officer.¹⁴ As noted earlier, almost all of the first group of foreigners were German, except for one Norwegian, Johan W. Munte (1864–1935), a close friend of Yuan. All these foreigners would play an important

role in Yuan's military program, especially Constantin von Hanneken (1855–1925), a German, who forged a lifelong tie with Yuan.

In terms of weaponry and equipment, Yuan's army should be seen as one of the most advanced in the world and (except in size) comparable to the German army. According to Yuan's report to the central government on January 14, 1896, his troops had received 1,000 Mannlicher rifles, and he requested an additional 5,400 such rifles, 700 Mannlicher carbines, 1,000 pistols, 40 Krug cannons, and other equipment.¹⁵ German instructors served as middlemen for the purchase of weapons and equipment from Germany, Austria-Hungary, and other European countries. In just a few years, all soldiers and officers were equipped with the most advanced weapons. According to the senior Chinese diplomat in Europe, Xu Jingcheng, Yuan's army and the German army were almost indistinguishable in terms of weapons and equipment. Yuan's troops also used Western military tents, telescopes, watches, drums, bugles, telephones, and other devices. Soldiers were given personal accessories, such as raincoats, rain caps, carpets, kettles, and emergency kits, all made in the West.¹⁶ The superior weapons and equipment enabled Yuan to keep up with global trends in military modernization and underscored his determination to enhance the fighting ability of his troops.

Yuan Shikai endeavoured to procure qualified officers for his army and its expansion. Under the old system, soldiers who contributed on the battlefield were promoted. Yuan respected those men, but he also realized that those fearless fighters knew nothing about science. Yuan recruited graduates from the Tianjin Military Academy, which Li Hongzhang had established a decade earlier, and allowed those who had studied abroad to join as well. More importantly, he started to establish on-base military schools (*xingyingwubeixuetang*) in 1896, admitting 234 young, intelligent, literate soldiers as cadets.¹⁷ Of these, 80 were instructed in artillery, 80 in infantry, and 24 in cavalry, and 50 learned German. Yuan earmarked one-third of his salary (200 taels) as a scholarship to be awarded to the best cadets.¹⁸ He believed that in the future, more talent would be trained in these schools and more competent generals would be developed. Outstanding cadets, after two years' study, would be sent overseas, to Germany or Japan, to pursue further military learning. Cadets who were trained in this way later became officers in Yuan's expanding army.

Yuan also saw it as important to recruit qualified soldiers. He created a new recruiting system, similar to that of the West, to seek better men for his army. On taking command of the army, he dispatched

his vice-commander, Wu Changchun, to recruit eligible men in Anhui, Shandong, Henan, and Jiangsu to strengthen his infantry.¹⁹ He also sent trusted men to Manchuria to recruit qualified candidates for his cavalry.²⁰ The urgent problem confronting the army was that many of its soldiers were old and weak and had become incapable of carrying out their duties. Yuan gradually discharged them and sent them home to pursue other occupations.²¹ His recruiting announcements show that he set high standards: candidates had to be between twenty and twenty-four, more than capable of lifting a hundred-pound weight, taller than 1.46 metres, and able to march 10 kilometres in one hour; also, they had to possess a legal residential address, be without a criminal record, stay healthy, and never have smoked opium.²² After several years of careful recruitment, his army numbered more than seven thousand men. In 1898, he recruited an additional two thousand men, and in 1899 he added a battalion of five hundred transport soldiers. His Newly Established Army now had around ten thousand men.²³

Yuan adopted Western-style drills for his new recruits, who had to go through three months of individual drill before beginning column drill. New soldiers had to achieve preset targets in marching, running, and rifle handling. After that, soldiers performed regular drills that reflected the specific requirements of their units. Infantry were taught how to march in formation, in addition to combat skills. They were also taught how to handle rifles, swords, and bayonets and how to read local topographical features. Artillery, cavalry, engineer, and transport soldiers were all trained using Western techniques and had to achieve the standards established for the units to which they had been assigned. After all this training, Yuan's troops gained well-founded confidence and coordinated well with one another. Yuan and his staff wrote pamphlets instructing his soldiers in military tactics and strategy.

Central to Yuan's system was the staging of mock battles as training exercises. He conducted a number of these in Zhili (Hebei) Province. He often divided his troops into two sections: a North Army versus a South Army, or an East Army versus a West Army. He would be in charge of one army while a subordinate or a German instructor directed the other. These combat exercises with real weapons and ammunition introduced the troops to war-like conditions; they were expected to march at the required speed, choose the right positions, and fire their bullets and shells at "the enemy" with precision. Soon after each mock battle, Yuan required officers to draw lessons from their successes and failures and advised them on how to improve in future field exercises.²⁴

All those who have researched Yuan's military training speak highly of his strict discipline and his methods for training responsible, qualified, orderly, moral, and honourable troops. His rules were intended to prevent misconduct, absence without leave, and lapses in duties, as well as to prevent abusive behaviour towards civilians. He imposed a variety of minor punishments on those who broke the rules or failed to carry out their duties. He also made it clear that eighteen major offences would be punishable by death, including fleeing the battlefield, giving away military secrets, stealing from local civilians, raping women, smoking opium, and organizing gangs.²⁵ Primary sources indicate that capital punishment for soldiers was rare but not unknown; for example, Liu Fukui was executed for stealing and selling weapons and equipment.²⁶ Minor punishments were often imposed on those who did not reach their assigned goals. Those who received minor reprimands included future national figures such as Feng Guozhang and Cao Kun.²⁷ However, Yuan often offered pardons or clemency so as to give minor offenders the chance to correct their faults. What Yuan hated most were deserters, who were punished by floggings and demoted to coolies.²⁸ At the other end of the spectrum, Yuan rewarded his best troops and urged others to follow their example.

Closely related to Yuan's strict discipline was his ideological indoctrination of his troops to transform them into loyal fighters for the empire. Yuan explained that indoctrination was intended to strengthen soldiers' hearts and that military drills were meant to enhance their skills. Without indoctrination, they would not know loyalty and righteousness; without drills, they would be unfamiliar with military combat.²⁹ Yuan himself composed "The Song of the Soldiers' Exhortation" (*quanbingge*) to promote loyalty to the emperor, cultivate patriotism, develop a sense of duty, instill respect for officers, nurture honest individuals, and honour bravery.³⁰ He believed that the old system had stopped working and that ideological indoctrination was vital to the success of the new one. He taught soldiers to be steadfast in their honourable service to the country and to bear in mind that foreign invasion would be a national humiliation.³¹ In particular, he reminded his soldiers that one's life and death were determined by Heaven and were beyond individual control. Soldiers should not be afraid of sacrificing their lives. Those who died for their country would be remembered as martyrs. A soldier who sacrificed his life for his country brought himself the greatest possible glory.³²

Yuan's thoroughly Western approach to military training was unprecedented in China. Indeed, his army, though only ten thousand

men, represented a radical break with Chinese military heritage. We cannot measure its actual effectiveness because it never fought in a real war. But from the testimonies of Chinese and foreign visitors to Xiaozhan, we can say that he had trained an efficient modern force. One journalist reported on Yuan's training just six months after he assumed command: "Yuan Shikai enforced strict discipline and eradicated the soldiers' habitually bad behaviors."³³ Ronglu, the minister of the Board of the Military, praised Yuan in early 1896 for emulating German drills, training better troops, and creating a brand-new army.³⁴ British admiral Lord Charles Beresford (1846–1919) visited Xiaozhan and stayed with Yuan for two days on October 27–28, 1898. He was impressed by what he saw: "The whole force appeared an exceptionally smart body of men of extreme fine physique," "their discipline was excellent," and "the army is the only army complete in all detail, according to European ideas, that I found in China." He also praised Yuan himself: "I found that General most energetic and intelligent and a well-informed and well-educated man. He is a thorough patriotic Chinaman and most loyal to the dynasty"; "if all the Chinese men were like General Yuan Shikai, the armies and their financial arrangements would not be in the condition they are now." However, Beresford noted that Yuan's equipment was "useless" when his army manoeuvred in rough and muddy fields.³⁵ Yuan had achieved much in just three years but still had a long way to go to build a truly modern army.

THE ORIGINS OF A MILITARY AND POLITICAL CLIQUE

Yuan Shikai's three years at Xiaozhan were significant not only for his personal advancement but also for modern Chinese history. His newly trained army was not large, but it was growing. When Yuan first assumed command, it had fewer than five thousand men; by the time the army left Xiaozhan in 1899, it had doubled in size and was an impressive force. It would continue to grow until, by the end of the Qing dynasty, it was the empire's most powerful military unit. It was at the Xiaozhan barracks, under Yuan, that it abandoned the old system and became a modern and highly professional force. And it was this army that enabled Yuan to become the first president of the Republic of China.

Yuan's strict discipline strengthened his army's combat capability. Indeed, that discipline was so strict that some officials condemned Yuan for developing a personality cult among his troops. On paper, the army belonged to the state; but according to its critics, it had become Yuan's

private force. This view echoed throughout twentieth-century literature and persists to this day. Some have claimed that Yuan exploited Confucian notions of loyalty to such a degree that his troops were loyal only to him and not to the emperor – that they recognized only Yuan as their leader and were ignorant of the Qing ruler and turned a blind eye to the imperial government.³⁶ Some scholars state plainly that the army turned into a private army,³⁷ or a semi-private army,³⁸ or a semi-private armed force.³⁹ These charges may contain a kernel of truth, since Yuan benefited enormously from the army, continued to build it into a cohesive force, and finally turned it into a powerful politico-military block within modern China.

Some officers suffered under Yuan's training regimen, for it meant they could no longer easily embezzle military funds. Some civilians in the Tianjin area hated his strict rules prohibiting commercial transactions between soldiers and civilians. Consequently, a formal impeachment against Yuan was filed in April 1896 by Hu Jinggui, a censor, to the Imperial Court listing four unlawful offences supposedly committed by Yuan: pursuing goals so exalted as to be unachievable, embezzling military funds, enforcing absurd discipline, and harassing the local community.⁴⁰ These accusations had some validity, but only from the accusers' perspective, in that Yuan set goals that others could not easily understand, used military money for some public purposes, established at times unbearable discipline, and punished local peddlers – indeed, he ordered one of them to be executed near the entrance to the barracks.⁴¹ The Imperial Court dispatched a group of special investigators, including Ronglu, to investigate the charges against him.⁴² Upon arrival, Ronglu and his fellow investigators were impressed by Yuan's military drills. In his report to the emperor, Ronglu praised Yuan for his Western approach to military reform. He declared that Yuan was indispensable to military modernization and that the charges against him were groundless.⁴³ Even so, the impeachment hit Yuan hard. In a private letter to his friend Xu Shichang, Yuan said that "for two months I suffered from dizziness and felt depressed."⁴⁴ Much to the chagrin of his accuser, Yuan was promoted to provincial judicial superintendent in July 1897, although he was assigned mainly to continue training his army in Xiaozhan.

Yuan had a long-term plan to develop a highly modernized crack force and a cohesive organization. He resorted to a variety of means to win the hearts of his troops, but his methods were always aboveboard and involved winning the trust of his officers and soldiers. He never arranged for any of his relatives to be officers – a policy still praised by today's

scholars. On the contrary, he hired qualified officers to staff his army. He trained his soldiers well and established a tight bond with them, one that Duan Qirui described as “a profound compassion exceeding blood ties.”⁴⁵ In late 1898, Cixi, the empress dowager, awarded Yuan four thousand taels for his contribution to strengthening China. Yuan promptly “distributed all of those taels among his troops, which won their thunderous applause and mellifluous accolade.”⁴⁶ Perhaps he was using the money to bind his soldiers to him. His daughter once remarked that “his soldiers gained the impression that he was the parent who provided everyone with everything. Only by following him could one expect promotion.”⁴⁷

Whatever means Yuan used to train his troops, the result was a modern professional force. In a sense, the troops became new soldiers and new individuals. The army had become a vast constellation with Yuan as the shining sun in the centre. The long-held negative image of his army as a gang of warlords needs to be revised. Some of Yuan’s soldiers did indeed become warlords later on, but they were not warlords when Yuan trained them. Recent studies suggest that it is unfair to assert that they became warlords while under Yuan’s tutelage. Over the past decade, many scholars – especially in Mainland China – have taken a fresh look at Yuan and his soldiers, carefully revisiting Yuan’s military reforms and gauging their impact on China’s modern armed forces.

A review of Yuan’s senior officers finds that most of them were educated in military science at military academies. Also striking is that 81.7 percent of them came from Zhili (Hebei), Anhui, Shandong, and Henan provinces. In terms of background, 8.3 percent came from Yuan’s former Korean office, 15 percent came from the former Anhui Army, and 71 percent were graduates of the Tianjin Military Academy. Even more amazing, most of them came from poor peasant families. Their desperate upbringing drove them to be diligent, ambitious, and enterprising.⁴⁸ With Yuan as their leader, this coterie formed a solid military organization. Admittedly, many of them did become warlords after Yuan’s death, when they occupied territories and became the targets of revolutionary movements. But around the turn of the twentieth century, the Yuan Clique – later known as the Beiyang Clique – was an innovative and modernized military group.

Under Yuan’s leadership, this group, in particular the officers, contributed to military training and theory. Yuan understood the importance of learning military theories, strategies, and tactics from other countries. He ordered nearly fifty officers to translate recently published Western and Japanese military books into Chinese and to gather information about

military drills; the purpose of this was to offer practical guidance to his army and other military forces. Over the years at Xiaozhan, Yuan and his officers worked on two multi-volume sets of military books. Yuan led the team that wrote and edited them. Before presenting them to the emperor in July 1898 and August 1899, Yuan carefully scrutinized both, which were titled *Bingluelucun* (*Record of Military Strategies*) and *Xunlian-caofaxiangxitushuo* (*Detailed Illustrations of Drills*) and listed Yuan as the author. Unfortunately, they have long been neglected because of Yuan's negative political image.⁴⁹ This huge project required all involved to work closely under Yuan's supervision. It is fair to say that the two sets display Yuan's talent and leadership skills. Under his direction, this small coterie shared a common interest, established a common goal, and embraced a common fate.

To establish a modern force, Yuan fostered a special tie with his officers. By showcasing his superb army, he attracted a robust group of military leaders. He set out to recruit highly qualified graduates from the military academy as officers, and he promoted talented young soldiers to officer rank. He also helped his officers in various ways in their daily lives. According to his daughter, Yuan was familiar with all his officers from the highest-ranking down to squad leaders. "He could immediately call out their names and knew their personal character and disposition, including strengths and weaknesses."⁵⁰ Sometimes he even arranged his officers' marriages so that they would be better able to focus on their military training or related tasks. When opportunities arose, Yuan wasted no time promoting his officers. The esprit de corps of Yuan's coterie enabled him to achieve his reforms. That coterie eventually produced four presidents (Yuan Shikai, Feng Guozhang, Xu Shichang, Cao Kun), six prime ministers (Duan Qirui, Wang Shijie, Duan Zhigui, Tang Shaoyi,⁵¹ Zhang Huaizhi, Jin Yunpeng), and thirty-four military provincial governors during the Republican period.⁵²

But the backbone of Yuan's army was his ordinary soldiers, for whom he showed the utmost concern. He punished those who violated discipline, but he also spared no effort in taking care of his troops. He did not punish his soldiers without a reason. He oversaw the payment of soldiers in person on the parade ground. He endeavoured to provide them with a good diet and to protect them from contagious diseases.⁵³ During the hot summers, he scheduled daily drills for the early morning and late afternoon to avoid the scorching noonday sun. He made the soldiers feel proud of their new status as state-funded military professionals: "You do not belong to any traditional class categories of scholars, peasants,

manufacturers, or merchants. Yet, you are sustained by the state and instructed by officers ... You have a great expectation for a prosperous future.”⁵⁴ To strengthen his ties with his troops, Yuan often participated in drills like an ordinary soldier, sometimes driving himself to exhaustion. Once during drill, it suddenly rained and his aide-de-camp opened an umbrella for him. He refused it, telling him that “all the soldiers and officers are in the rain, why shouldn’t I be in the rain with them?”⁵⁵

To establish a positive image for his army as a special unit of the nation, Yuan conceptualized a particular relationship between his troops and the local populace. He declared that the local people were hosts who provided food and other supplies, as well as guides who were familiar with the surrounding topography.⁵⁶ This was a means to inculcate respect for the local populace, but it had a deeper connotation besides: Yuan intended to forge a new tie with the people. To that end, he ordered his troops not to harass or disturb the populace, and especially not to harm the local women. He emphasized harmony between his troops and the local populace and insisted that only with the people’s support could the army be victorious.⁵⁷ He ordered the troops not to destroy people’s crops and never to seize anything from them. He equated any aggressive behaviour of this kind with harassing one’s own family. On a daily basis, soldiers were segregated from civilians, and when they did engage in local affairs, they were to remember to be respectfully cautious.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

Historians usually consider it their task to uncover the vital role of certain important individuals in shaping a particular era, yet few scholars have done so with regard to Yuan Shikai’s years in Xiaozhan, doubtless because of the negative image that has long been held of him. When his Xiaozhan experience is mentioned, he is typically described as a warlord. But over the past three decades, more scholars have studied Yuan more objectively, highlighting his vital role in modernizing China’s military. The military training he instituted had as its purpose the defence of a declining empire, and to that end, he departed radically from the old military tradition. In the broad historical context, Yuan’s years at Xiaozhan should be viewed as a significant achievement in an agrarian society. More importantly, his adoption of the Western military system placed him in the vanguard of military reform. He truly deserves the title of the father of China’s first modern army.⁵⁹

Yuan's army was a laboratory for China's military experiment. From field training to organizational structure, from weapons purchases to uniforms, and from ordinary practice to complex theories, Yuan's deft leadership represented a sharp break with China's military past. He upended a system in which the largest unit was the battalion and established the diverse levels of a new, more flexible order: division, regiment, battalion, company, platoon, and squad. This new system would enable China to fight a large-scale war instead of merely localized warfare; no longer was it restricted by the battalion system, which tended to thwart broader coordination. Besides developing fighting capability, Yuan's army had absorbed new functions, such as logistics supply and intelligence gathering. His army's five categories – infantry, cavalry, artillery, engineering, transport – reflected the most advanced military arrangements of that time. In addition, Yuan organized a marching band to play a military song to boost the soldiers' morale. Interestingly enough, the tune of his marching song would be used by the future Nationalist army and is still used by Communist forces today.⁶⁰ Having incorporated so many new features into his army, Yuan soon became a national celebrity – indeed, his fame was international.

From a sociological perspective, Yuan's army was a unique organization. He had turned his army into a modern fighting force. More noticeably, a small coterie of dedicated military officers gradually appeared around Yuan. This Xiaozhan coterie would evolve into the Beiyang Clique, the foundation of the northern regime during the turbulent early Republican period, and would become what Ralph L. Powell calls the root of modern Chinese militarism.⁶¹ As one Japanese scholar notes, Yuan's efforts at Xiaozhan led to the formation of a politico-military group as a *de facto* political party (i.e., one without a formal party title).⁶² That group steadily penetrated into politics, the economy, social life, diplomacy, and other fields and would play a significant role in Chinese national life for several decades.

5

The Hundred Days

Yuan Shikai's training of the first modern army coincided with the emerging reform movement led by Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) during the same period of national crisis. Although Yuan was not a leader of this movement, he participated in it, financially supported it, and offered proposals for it. Confronted by the recent humiliating military defeat and the protracted national crisis that followed it, Yuan submitted his petitions for reform to the Imperial Court, taking a broad-minded approach. Many of his points were couched in bold yet practical terms; the intent of his project was to deter foreign aggression, preserve the nation, and strengthen the empire. For decades, however, Yuan's negative image and the concealment of various documents in dusty archives has blocked any careful study of Yuan as a reformer. But those relevant materials, such as Yuan's petitions, letters, and memorials, have been declassified in recent years, and historians can now glimpse the mind of a young reformer.

Yuan Shikai joined the reform movement at its outset. His subsequent hectic schedule as a military trainer did not allow him to participate fully in the activities led by Kang and Liang, who in 1898 would press the young monarch, Emperor Guangxu, to issue the reforms of the Hundred Days. Yuan's command of the first modern army had long attracted the attention of reformers, who saw him as possibly adding wind to their political sails. This explains why they bet heavily on him when they confronted the conservatives' counterattack in 1898; they planned to use him to stage a pre-emptive strike to kill the

conservative leaders and detain Empress Dowager Cixi so that they could continue with their reforms. It is possible that the reformers had drawn Yuan into their dangerous scheme without his consent. At the critical moment, according to the traditional view, Yuan “betrayed” the reformers by divulging their plot to Ronglu, a prominent conservative; this led to the coup by Cixi, which in turn led to the failure of the Hundred Days reforms of 1898.

For more than a century the Chinese have denounced Yuan Shikai for his “betrayal,” that is, for reporting the plot to his superior Ronglu. Western scholars echo this condemnation.¹ But this widespread assumption among historians regarding Yuan’s “perfidy” was questioned by Huang Zhangjian, a scholar from Taiwan, who published a scholarly work in 1970 contesting the old view and arguing that Yuan’s divulgence did not cause the coup.² Unfortunately, many Chinese continue to hold the old conviction. Only recently have Mainland scholars done a thorough investigation using abundant primary sources; they now argue that Yuan’s mention of the reformers’ plot to Ronglu was not what brought about Cixi’s coup. This is not to deny that Yuan’s actions led to the victimization of more reformers. This chapter utilizes recently uncovered primary sources and newly published scholarship to analyze Yuan’s reform ideas, his role in the reform movement, and his actions during the coup.

YUAN SHIKAI’S REFORM IDEAS

The long-held view was that Yuan was an opportunist during the reform movement. Today, conversely, he is seen as a proponent of reform, as his ideas for transforming his country make plain. In his writings, he challenged the traditional view that China was culturally superior and supreme among nations. This old ideological paradigm was the basis of the tributary system, a paternal relationship with neighbouring states that emphasized a condescending Chinese cultural suzerainty. Because of this mentality, Yuan observed, “it was a shame for upper-class children to interact with foreigners.”³ Now, at this critical moment, foreign powers were scrambling greedily to enter China, which was in imminent danger of being carved up.⁴ In Yuan’s view, China needed to stop being so vain. He urged his compatriots to abandon the old cultural conceit, adapt to the new international reality, and strive to establish China’s new status as a power among nations.⁵

Yuan Shikai defied the then dominant diplomatic strategy of “taming foreigners by utilizing foreigners,” a hallmark of Li Hongzhang’s foreign policy. Given China’s weakness, it was not difficult for Li to justify this approach. Yuan believed that this policy “may achieve momentary peace. Yet, no foreign power can absorb China’s calamities for her.”⁶ For Yuan, it was a cruel irony that this passive diplomacy could only result in disaster, because the foreign powers often sacrificed China for their own national interests. Yuan propounded a new concept, active diplomacy, whereby knowledgeable individuals of high quality who understood international affairs would be selected as diplomats. He felt that China should adopt the Western diplomatic hierarchy, one that included ambassadors, consuls, counsellors, attachés, and translators. Diplomats should collect information, promote cultural understanding, and handle unexpected emergencies. Yuan suggested that residents of Guangdong and Fujian provinces who had frequent contacts with the West should be selected, trained in Beijing, and then sent overseas as diplomats. Students at Tongwenguan and other academies should be trained and dispatched overseas for further education in preparation for becoming China’s overseas representatives.⁷

Yuan Shikai thought it imperative that the Chinese learn more about global affairs, because “neither Chinese officials nor ordinary people are familiar with foreign issues. Whenever a conflict arises, a power often uses a pretext, becomes aggressive, and willfully seizes China’s national interests.” Because it lacked knowledge of foreign culture, China too often offered readily whatever a strong power demanded.⁸ Yuan proposed to “develop a normal relationship with nations, learn their geography, and study their customs. With these, China might not be easily bullied.” To justify his stance, Yuan cited a parable: “Even if fierce tigers and poisonous snakes are dangerous, they may be tamed if you know their nature. Even [if] dogs, horses, oxen, and sheep are docile, they may hurt people if you do not understand their nature.”⁹

China’s weakness, according to Yuan, was the result of centuries of excessive pride, whereas the strength of foreign powers was the result of their carefully orchestrated efforts at reform. Yuan was not a pessimist, and he believed that China’s future could be bright provided that it followed the successful foreign model. In his view, reform would reshape the country, boost its prominence, and elevate it to the rank of an equal power. He pointed to successful precedents to promote reform and to examples of deplorable failure to warn the conservatives. He used Japan as a positive example, remarking that “the land of Japan is only the size of

one or two provinces of China ... The reason why Japan could win [over China] was because it emulated the Western way and forcibly enforced it.”¹⁰ Japan’s accomplishments suggested that reforms offered lucrative returns; negative examples demonstrated the heartbreaking fiascos that could result when there were no reforms. “Burma and Vietnam defended the old tradition but they gradually perished” as independent nations.¹¹ Yuan’s rhetoric was intended to persuade the Chinese to embrace reform to achieve the goals of national defence, economic prosperity, and social stability.

Reform programs should be carried out by progressive officials, Yuan felt, because “China’s poverty was caused by conservative officials who stuck to the old way.”¹² He maintained that wealthy countries had prospered because they respected talent. Talented citizens should be identified, trained, and educated and then employed as precious national assets. Talented people from the provinces should be gathered together for appraisal by the central government. Given the prominence of the Civil Service Examination System, Yuan proposed that its structure be maintained but that new content be added, for the ancient classics were of no practical use. The examination system could continue, but it had to be steered towards practical learning, modern science, advanced culture, serviceable technology, and a Westernized military. Degrees would be bestowed to successful candidates, who would be hired as officials to run the various levels of administration.¹³

Central to Yuan’s reforms was economic management. He denounced the long-held discrimination against merchants, who suffered at the hands of social elites and government officials. Yuan defended the role of merchants in the new global economic system and supported the establishment of chambers of commerce in order to promote the national economy. Besides commerce, Yuan championed the building of railway lines and the opening of mines; he also supported banking initiatives, promoted manufacturing, and called for a new tax system and postal services. Since all of these were new to China, foreign managers could be hired. Yuan knew from experience that Western managers possessed the required skills, tended to be punctual, and acted impartially; at the same time, though, they were inclined towards arrogance and condescension and were difficult for the Chinese to control. Yuan proposed that Chinese be dispatched overseas to train as managers; this would prepare them for important assignments.¹⁴

Naturally, the training of a modern army and the establishment of a Western-style military were essential components in Yuan’s thought.

His plan to radically reconstruct China's fighting forces encompassed a number of aspects, including the recruitment and training of soldiers, the selection of officers, the enforcement of discipline, and the restructuring of fighting forces. To foster patriotism, troops should be reminded of past national humiliations. The point of military reform was effective national defence. Thus new soldiers should be trained to be brave, devoted, honest, and skilful. From the standpoint of military modernization, it is fair to say that Yuan himself had set an example for all of this.

Yuan maintained that the educational system should develop qualified individuals. Traditional education with the Civil Service Examination System as a matrix had outlived its effectiveness and usefulness because of its too strong emphasis on the classics. A recurring theme in Yuan's thought was that the traditional content of the examination system must be replaced with modern content. Yuan pointed to the widening gap between the elegant literature of Neo-Confucianism and Western-style, down-to-earth, science-based education. He called on the state to build new schools and hire Westerners as instructors. He intended to train talented individuals who knew Western learning and who were versed in science, commerce, agriculture, irrigation, postal service, international law, physics, civil engineering, mine management, geography, Western history, languages, and literature. He suggested gathering together scholars to translate Western books for this new educational system.¹⁵

Yuan's ideas seem to have been similar to those of other reformers, such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao. Indeed, many of their ideas were analogous. Yet a close examination brings significant differences to light. Yuan's approach to reform differed utterly from that of Kang and Liang. Kang and Liang promoted reform from above; Yuan would reform from below, making room for grassroots initiatives. For this, local administrators would need to be properly empowered so as to maximize their capabilities within the framework of imperial rule. For Yuan, national reform could succeed only if local officials fully understood, willingly accepted, and faithfully carried out the reform measures. He remarked that "if the local officials break with the old customs, carry out the reforms sincerely, and act truthfully, China's self-strengthening goals could be reached within about a decade." In this time of national crisis, Yuan declared that "one province accepting reform can mean that one province will be saved."¹⁶

Kang and Liang proposed rapid reform; this would involve urging the emperor to issue edicts and compelling the people to instantly carry them out. Yuan's approach was more gradual, exploratory, and experimental.

He rejected rash adventures; on the contrary, he suggested that the central government should

select two or three loyal and gifted governors to emulate the Western way and implement the reforms ... Those governors will be confined to established rules but not interfered with. They perform their duties within a certain timespan. Once the reforms are achieved, their successful measures should be quickly cataloged by the state which will order other provinces to emulate them, one province after another.¹⁷

Yuan's evidence-based approach was meant to avoid any sudden breakdown of the state if regional reforms were not carried out effectively. His ideas placed great stock in stability, controllability, accountability, and sustainability; actions were to be analyzed, and models that worked were to be applied slowly. This approach would lead gradually to wise public policy.

Both Yuan and Kang acknowledged that conservative officials' hostile resistance would impede reforms. However, they differed in how they intended to treat these potential adversaries. For Kang, a radical method was workable: expelling those stubborn and self-willed officials or even eliminating them by force. Yuan did not concur. He realized that reform would threaten the conservatives' vested interests. To win public support for reform, stabilize social life, and avoid unnecessary conflicts, Yuan cautioned that "those old officials should not be dismissed; rather, they should be sustained by the state with bountiful subsidies and rich funds and be bestowed with eminent honors and venerable tributes."¹⁸ Such an approach would soften potential defiance, move the old administrators peacefully to one side, and accomplish reform with less animosity from conservative officials and their social networks.

At first glance, it seems that we might align Yuan Shikai with the rank-and-file followers of Kang Youwei, for they shared common objectives and dreamed of achieving similar goals. However, a closer examination reveals that Yuan was at odds with Kang on a number of points. Yuan's ideas were pragmatic and perhaps more realistic; Kang's radical approach was reckless and impulsive. Yuan's ideas were confined within certain careful limits; Kang's targeted the entire nation. In terms of creative thinking, ideological sweep, and cultural underpinning, Yuan was no match for Kang. Kang had dropped an "intellectual bomb" with his bold challenge to outdated tradition and his wish to "destroy the old edifice";¹⁹ Yuan's position fell between that of the self-strengtheners led by Li Hongzhang

and that of the reformers led by Kang Youwei. Kang intended to found a parliamentary system; Yuan did not intend to overturn the existing political system. Kang's blueprint was audacious; Yuan's tended towards prudence. These ideological discrepancies would have an impact on their future uneasy cooperation.

YUAN SHIKAI AND THE REFORMERS

For a long time, Yuan was disdained as an opportunist who only cloaked himself as a reformer, as a flagrant self-promoter who only pretended to support the reform movement while biding his time before gaining his own advantage.²⁰ But the long-held image of him as a pseudo-reformer is not accurate: newly declassified sources show that he participated in the reform movement. Those who still denigrate him as an opportunist are suffering from historical inertia. It can no longer be denied that he was thoroughly involved in the reform movement and that he befriended reformers. He not only fashioned his own ideas on reform but also acted on those ideas, for which he won the trust of reformers, in particular, of Kang Youwei.

Yuan helped found the Strengthen Learning Society (*Qiangxuehui*) in August 1895, while he was on the staff of the Grand Council. That society has been hailed as the first reform organization in modern China, because it aimed to promote reform through Western learning. Yuan took part in its activities and donated five hundred taels to support it – a whopping sum for a young official. With Yuan setting an example, the society soon took in several thousand taels in donations. The society convened meetings every ten days, allowing its members to voice diverse opinions. Yuan often tapped into his Korean experience and his victories over the Japanese to promote reform. According to Kang Youwei, “everyone was fond of him [Yuan] for his fascinating remarks, and respected him as a hero.”²¹ The society existed for just a few months, but it brought together reform-minded individuals for patriotic activities and reform-related discussions.

Membership in this unique group offered Yuan a chance to acquaint himself with leading reformers, in particular with Kang Youwei. Yuan admired Kang's courage and was impressed by his views on how to transform Chinese traditions. During the months that they worked together in the Strengthen Learning Society, according to Kang, they “sat together, drank together, and discussed the current issues together. Yuan called

Kang his elder brother, while Kang regarded Yuan [as] his young sibling.”²² Perhaps nothing was more important to this tie than Yuan’s willingness to help Kang submit a memorial to the emperor through the Grand Council. The effort failed in the end; even so, it showed Kang that Yuan was reliable. Before Yuan left Beijing for Xiaozhan in late 1895, Kang held a party in Yuan’s honour. There, Kang staged a play about Yue Fei, an ancient patriotic hero, whose deeds that night moved all to tears, for they were witnessing a similar national crisis.²³ For the next three years, Kang devoted his energies to the reform movement while Yuan kept a busy military schedule. Yet at crucial moments of the reform movement, Kang saw hope in Yuan, which suggests why he recommended him as a high-ranking official during the Hundred Days.

Yuan’s departure from Beijing did not end his special bond with the reformers. While stationed at Xiaozhan, Yuan maintained close ties with Yan Fu, Xia Zengyou, and Wang Xiuzhi, all pro-Western reformers in Tianjin, which was twenty miles away. This circle held seminars every Saturday to discuss national affairs. According to Yan Fu, “Yuan attended the meetings every Saturday” and his “broad mind, bold remarks, insightful points, and fearless courage” impressed all. Yan Fu even joked that “Yuan Shikai can be emperor”; Yuan teased back that “‘if I become emperor, my first duty will be to execute you.’ Hearing this, all were amused and applauded loudly.”²⁴ Clearly, Yuan made a good impression on Yan Fu’s small circle, who deliberated on national and international affairs, published articles in their journal, and spread their progressive ideas. Yuan’s extraordinary experience as an active young military commander was a valuable asset to the reform movement.

It is possible that Yuan Shikai affected the reform movement through Weng Tonghe, for in late 1897 and early 1898 he showed him his two petitions calling for reform. Weng was Emperor Guangxu’s private tutor and a high-ranking official, and Yuan intended to submit those petitions to the emperor through him. Yuan even visited Weng in person on January 17, 1898. According to Weng’s diary, “Yuan Shikai came to discuss the current national situation, showing me a pictorial demonstrating the carve-up of China by the powers.”²⁵ Although we know that Weng read the petitions and was impressed by them; we cannot know whether they had an impact on the monarch since there is no evidence that the emperor read them. That said, Weng was a driving force behind the reform movement, and given that he read them, Yuan’s petitions may well have had an impact. Unfortunately, Weng had become a thorn in

the flesh for the conservatives, who pushed successfully for his dismissal and ordered him to return to his native province of Jiangsu. When Weng “travelled through Tianjin, Yuan Shikai sent an envoy to present a load of gifts to him.”²⁶

The reformers endeavoured to build a coterie surrounding the young monarch as a centripetal force, and Yuan tried to join this faction. A number of times, he pushed for reform in his suggestions to the ruler. Emperor Guangxu viewed Yuan as a rising star and a potentially useful modernizer, and cherished his contribution to military training. Thus he granted Yuan private meetings between 1895 and 1898 – a rare honour for a young official. During those meetings, Yuan flattered Guangxu as a sagacious ruler, highlighted his family’s special ties with the Imperial Court, and pledged his loyalty.²⁷ There is no doubt that the emperor trusted this promising young man and saw him as someone who might help him advance his reform agenda.

It is fair to say that Yuan was deeply involved in the reform movement. His enthusiasm, acumen, and bold suggestions impressed other reformers. The reform camp was not a tightly organized political party with a restricted membership; rather, it was a social and political response to the recent national crisis and anyone who was interested in its agenda could participate. Yuan was an active contributor who had shown himself to be strongly reform-minded. The reformers did not see him as an outsider but as a committed member. They had developed their trust in him over many years and believed they could rely on him.

In the available primary sources there is no indication that Yuan ever broke with the reformers. Yuan, however, was busy with military training, while the reformers were consumed with their political manoeuvres. While Yuan was heavily occupied with his army, he dispatched his best friend, Xu Shichang, to attend Kang Youwei’s meetings. The fact that Xu always appeared at Kang’s gatherings demonstrates Yuan’s ongoing association with those leading reformers.²⁸ As noted earlier, the reform camp was not a united and disciplined political party; on the contrary, it was a loose and vaguely defined group in which individual participants did not have legally defined obligations. Seeing that Yuan had military power, the reformers calculated that forging a cohesive bond with him might eventually allow them to manoeuvre Yuan’s army into exerting pressure to further their reformist political goals. The reformers dreamed of utilizing Yuan, which explains why Kang dispatched his close confidant Xu Renlu in July 1898 to Xiaozhan to drive a wedge between Yuan and his superior Ronglu, a conservative, who lived in Tianjin. Kang’s

strategy to sow discord was linked to the reformers' political plans. The attempt proved to be futile, although we do not know specifically how Yuan responded to Xu Renlu's visit in Xiaozhan.²⁹

It would be incorrect to assume that Yuan's involvement in the reform movement had detached him from the conservatives. On the contrary, he maintained cordial working relations with them and never set out to affront them. His relationship with Ronglu, a member of the powerful and ultra-conservative Manchu elite, proves this. Yuan had always respected Ronglu and regarded him as a patron and a benefactor. As a subordinate of Ronglu, Yuan acted cautiously. After Yuan was promoted by Emperor Guangxu to the rank of minister, he immediately visited Wang Wenshao, Li Hongzhang, Yu Lu, Gang Yi, and various Manchu nobles, including Ronglu.³⁰ He told them he wished to resign, because he had not earned that high title. Only after those conservative officials persuaded him otherwise did Yuan retract his resignation.³¹ This indicates that Yuan kept a foot in both camps: the reformers and the conservatives. In terms of ideas, he was closer to the reformers; in terms of actions, he was not far from the conservatives. Thus he was able to assess the situation from both sides; ultimately, though, at a critical moment, he would stand with the conservatives during the approaching coup. In the end, Yuan and the conservatives would rain havoc on the reformers after the Hundred Days; by revealing their secret plot he would intensify the bloody purge against his former colleagues in the reform movement.

THE COUP OF 1898

In the long annals of academic history, few topics have attracted so many scholars to publish so many works with so many diverse views as Yuan Shikai's role in the coup to suppress the Hundred Days of 1898. Scholars have probed and analyzed almost every episode in the coup. Owing to the lack of official documents and the abundance of conflicting private writings, there is plenty of room for diverse interpretations. Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were hailed as heroes and blamed Yuan for "betraying" them, and their view was long accepted as definitive. While in exile in Japan, Liang wrote that "Yuan is a double-faced guileful man. He knew clearly that our emperor had no power and thus he betrayed his master and sought self-protection ... The catastrophe was directly caused by his actions."³² The Chinese have been influenced ever since by Kang and Liang's denunciations, and Yuan has been branded a wicked traitor.

His wickedness has been presented in the form of the following tidy chronology. On June 11, 1898, Emperor Guangxu proclaimed his order for reform, which launched the Hundred Days, during which he issued more than one hundred edicts. Empress Dowager Cixi opposed the reform and set out to derail it. On June 15, Weng Tonghe was stripped of his official positions and ordered to return to his home province. With Kang Youwei and other reformers' support, the young emperor continued to issue orders to reform China's economy, culture, military, administration, and education system. On September 16, Guangxu offered Yuan a personal audience and promoted him to minister. The emperor met Yuan twice more, on September 17 and 20. It is said that the emperor ran into strong resistance from the conservatives and issued secret edicts to the reformers calling for help. One reformer, Tan Sitong, was sent to talk to Yuan on the night of September 18. Tan asked Yuan to mobilize his troops to enter Beijing, eliminate the conservatives, and detain Cixi. Instead, Yuan reported the conspiracy to the conservatives, who launched a coup on September 21, detained Guangxu, and helped Cixi regain power. Thus ended the Hundred Days. This is the traditional view, one that directly blames Yuan for the coup.

The "ironclad facts" regarding Yuan's "betrayal" went unchallenged until Huang Zhangjian, a Taiwanese scholar, offered a revisionist perspective demonstrating that the coup was not caused by Yuan's divulgence of the reformers' plot to Ronglu. It would be two decades before Mainland Chinese scholars caught up with Huang. Since the 1990s, a multitude of scholarly works have been published by Mainland scholars, and most of them have embraced Huang's revisionist view. They have winnowed century-old archival documents to reappraise Yuan's activities during the coup, and it seems they have concluded unanimously that the coup was not caused by Yuan's divulgence of the plot to Ronglu.

The following outline has been developed from recent studies by revisionist scholars. Yuan Shikai's quick promotion by Emperor Guangxu on June 16, 1898, alarmed the conservatives; this is now seen as a factor in their strong response. Within days, the conservatives led by Ronglu had done the following: deployed Nie Shicheng's army of 17,000 troops to Chenjiagou to block any hostile march on Beijing from Tianjin; ordered Dong Fuxiang's army of 12,000 men to position itself in the Beijing area to defend the capital; deployed other troops to defend the capital while spreading the rumour that the British and Russians were about to invade; and petitioned Cixi to return to power.³³ The traditional regime relied on the military to suppress its political rivals; at this critical moment,

the conservatives strengthened their capacity to deal militarily with any emergencies caused by the reformers.

As the conservatives prepared to act, the reformers did not lag behind. But most of them were intellectuals with no military power behind them, although the emperor was on their side. Faced with pressure from Cixi, the emperor issued a number of secret edicts advising the reformers to act quickly, for his own position was not safe.³⁴ The contents of those secret edicts conflicted with one another – one of them urged the reformers to flee China. When they realized that their emperor was in danger, they discussed how to save him. According to Kang Youwei, their plan – a risky one – was to rely on Yuan: “Yuan Shikai succeeded in his mission to Korea, knew about foreign affairs, and advocated progressive reform. He participated in the establishment of the Strengthen Learning Society. He was different from other military men, such as Dong Fuxiang and Nie Shicheng. Yuan was the only military commander who could save our emperor.”³⁵ The reformers were about to risk everything on the single option of recruiting Yuan to eliminate the conservatives and detain Cixi.

All of this is what led to Tan Sitong’s secret visit to Yuan Shikai at the Fahua Temple in Beijing. Although accounts of what happened next vary with regard to how long the meeting lasted, who was present, and how Yuan reacted, most scholars today accept Yuan’s own account, found in *Wuxujilue* (A sketch of 1898) or *Wuxuriji* (The diary of 1898).³⁶ According to Yuan, during the night of September 18, 1898, a man suddenly appeared without invitation, requesting an urgent meeting at the temple. During the meeting, Tan told Yuan that the emperor was in danger. Yuan replied that he would give his life to save the monarch. But when Tan outlined the reformers’ conspiracy to kill the conservatives and detain Cixi, Yuan began to stall Tan with perfunctory replies. He later described Tan as an armed madman. Tan showed Yuan the emperor’s secret edict, which Yuan did not recognize as genuine. Clearly, Yuan had started to suspect Tan. Under pressure, Yuan agreed only to rescue the emperor and to kill conservatives at the military drills to be held in Tianjin in October, which the emperor and conservative leaders would be observing.

The next question is, exactly when did Yuan divulge the secret plan to Ronglu? The previous claim that Yuan immediately reported it to Yikuang has long been discredited. Had he done so, Cixi would have taken action immediately. Another theory is that Yuan, after another personal meeting with Emperor Guangxu on September 20, returned to Tianjin and immediately reported the plot to Ronglu, who rushed to Beijing to relay the information to Cixi. This cannot be true either, because Yuan arrived

in Tianjin in the mid-afternoon and attended a celebration at the railway station in honour of his latest promotion. When he arrived at Ronglu's place, it would have been quite late. After talking with guests, Yuan finally got a chance to speak to Ronglu around ten or eleven o'clock. By then, it would have been impossible for Ronglu to travel to Beijing, for the last train had left Tianjin around three o'clock in the afternoon; he would not even have been able to dispatch a telegram, because at that time of night, no one was on duty at the telegraph office – not to mention that the telegraph was an unsafe way to send so secret a message. So Ronglu travelled to Beijing in the morning of September 21. By the time he arrived in the capital, Cixi had already completed her coup.³⁷ There is another claim that Yuan heard about the coup at a meeting on September 21 in Tianjin. Fearing its repercussions, he disclosed what he knew to Ronglu. If this is true, Yuan's divulgence was of no consequence. Whatever the case, Yuan's report had not caused the coup, as the traditional view asserts.

What, then, was the impact of Yuan's divulgence of the reformers' conspiracy? Many scholars believe that Cixi's coup on September 21, 1898, was meant to be "peaceful,"³⁸ in that she proclaimed her regency under the pretext of Emperor Guangxu's ill health. She blamed the reformers for "their fallacious opinions that had led to the disarray in politics."³⁹ After receiving Yuan's report through Ronglu, Cixi was so furious that she ordered the arrest of the leading reformers. Kang Youwei fled to Hong Kong, Liang Qichao to Japan. Unfortunately, other reformers were arrested or removed from their positions. On September 28, 1898, the six famous reformers, known as the Six Gentlemen of 1898 (*Wuxuliujunzi*) – Tan Sitong, Yang Shenxiu, Lin Xu, Yang Rui, Liu Guangdi, and Kang Guangren – were publicly executed in Beijing. According to the official announcement, their "crime" had been that they "congregated as a rebellious clique, plotted to besiege the Summer Palace, and planned to kidnap the empress dowager."⁴⁰ So it is quite safe to say that Yuan's information did not lead to the coup, though it intensified the coup by broadening the conservatives' bloody purge. Heroic martyrs had sacrificed their lives for the reform movement; in Yuan's actions, there was no glory at all.

The reasons Yuan Shikai disclosed the reformers' plot are multiple and have been analyzed from diverse perspectives. He has been demonized for selling out the reformers, but the matter is not so simple, and a number of pertinent observations have been made. First of all, Yuan did not endorse the reformers' risky plot, for he saw it as too dangerous and too likely to fail. Even if Yuan had agreed to carry out the plot, Xiaozhan and Beijing were one hundred miles apart. Second, Yuan's seven

thousand soldiers constituted a modern army, but they were seriously short of ammunition; each soldier had only a couple of rounds, which was not enough to guarantee success. Third, the conservatives had already deployed troops around Beijing, and Yuan's army was far smaller than the forces he would have faced. Even if Yuan's troops had marched towards Beijing, this army would have been no match for the forces they would encounter along the way. Any audacious actions would be doomed. Lastly, Yuan's divulgence can be read as an act of "surrender" (*zishou*), for he knew that if it was learned that he had prior knowledge of the plot, he would be beheaded. In other words, he divulged the conspiracy in order to protect himself.⁴¹

Did the conservatives trust Yuan after his divulgence? Superficially, it seems they did. But in fact, they kept a close eye on him. The fact that he was not allowed to return to Xiaozhan after his meeting with Ronglu indicates that the conservatives took pains to separate him from his troops. He was assigned instead to serve as acting governor general of Zhili and acting Beiyang Minister for ten days, during which he was powerless. It is said that Cixi considered Yuan unreliable and planned to jail him because of his ties with the reformers.⁴² At this critical moment, Ronglu's protection saved him. On September 28, 1898, the day the six reformers were executed, a conservative politician asked Ronglu to punish Yuan for his double-dealing. Ronglu shielded Yuan: "he is my man and he is not a fraudster."⁴³ With Ronglu's protection and further recommendation, Yuan was not demoted but rather promoted within about a year. On January 6, 1899, Cixi offered Yuan an audience and granted him the honourable privilege of riding a horse in the Imperial Palace and rowing a royal boat on the nearby imperial lake. At the same time, Cixi bestowed on Yuan special foods, regal silverware, an imperial cash award, and a finely woven handbag with the symbol of "happiness" on it.⁴⁴ On June 16, 1899, Yuan was promoted to minister of the Department of Public Works.⁴⁵

It must be noted that Emperor Guangxu developed an intense hatred of Yuan after his hopes for a quick enactment of his reform program were dashed. Thereafter, the emperor lived on a tiny island called Yingtai on a small lake near the Imperial Palace. He was no longer a free man, although he was allowed to visit Cixi's side to watch her manage political affairs. The emperor would despise Yuan for the rest of his life. Rumour has it that he wrote the three characters of Yuan's name every day and tore them into tiny pieces while cursing him. When he was in Xi'an in 1900, the emperor often drew a turtle (which is pronounced "yuan," a

homophone of Yuan's surname), wrote "Yuan Shikai" on its back, and shot it to tiny pieces. He then used scissors to shred the remaining fragments to release his fury.⁴⁶ He once told Empress Longyu that Yuan had destroyed him.⁴⁷ From these accounts, it is clear that Emperor Guangxu was unable to free himself from his obsessive hatred, which unfortunately broke his health and hastened his death. Indeed, the reform movement was a personal tragedy for the once ambitious, reform-minded monarch.

CONCLUSION

In the new century, most scholars have accepted the verdict that Yuan's divulgence of the reformers' plot did not cause the coup of 1898. Many newly available materials support this revisionist view. During the previous century, however, amid the demonization of Yuan and because supportive documents were lacking, an objective assessment could not be made. To condemn Yuan became a political obligation. Since the 1980s, however, political exigencies have gradually been replaced by scholarly scrutiny, and this has done much to reverse the traditional view. Yuan is no longer declared guilty of having caused the coup. However, it is hard for ordinary people to abandon ethical judgments, and Yuan's actions are not endorsed by anyone, for by revealing the plot, he helped the conservatives persecute the reformers. Yuan's integrity may well continue to be a topic of historical discourse. The debate over Yuan's role in Cixi's coup will continue until someone is able to locate and utilize convincing primary sources to disentangle the political and moral strands and arrive at a fairer and less prejudiced verdict.

The reform movement was a great idealistic undertaking, and the reformers who sacrificed their lives for it were noble spirits. That said, the reformers showed political naivety in their dreams of changing China instantly. Their actions were unrealistic, their conspiracy was unworkable, and on many occasions they fumbled the issues. They tended to be too rash, too adventurous, too audacious, too impulsive, and too naive. They also drew Yuan into the maelstrom unleashed by the Hundred Days, implicating him in a dangerous task in which he did not want to be involved and that threatened his very life. It is quite possible that divulging the plot to his superiors was his only feasible option if he did not want to lose his head.

Yuan Shikai's ideas for reform did not perish with the failure of the Hundred Days. He still had faith in gradual progress, in regional experiments,

in the tranquil spread of successful models, and ultimately in nationwide reforms. In the ensuing decade, he would put his ideas into practice and set an example in Shandong and Zhili. Yet his anxiety over the divulgence would continue to haunt him. Yuan wrote his own account of the Hundred Days to show his loyalty to the emperor and to castigate Tan Sitong for his disloyalty in placing the monarch in danger. He made copies of it and gave them to his sons to keep. It was not until 1925 that one of them went to the media. It is interesting to note how generous Yuan was during his presidency in his treatment of the memory of the six martyrs of 1898. In 1914, he approved plans for the state to commemorate the Six Gentlemen. Accordingly, a shrine was built, a historical volume was compiled, and the relatives of those gentlemen received state compensation. All this was done, according to Yuan, to “offer ... highest respects to their lofty virtues and to glorify their valuable contributions.”⁴⁸

6

Governor of Shandong

Yuan Shikai's nearly two-year governorship of Shandong Province from 1899 to 1901 has elicited conflicting assessments. When he assumed the position in the midst of a national exigency, Shandong was a battlefield for internal as well as external conflicts. Internally, Yuan had to deal with the Boxer Uprising after that xenophobic movement became an international sensation. Externally, he had to cope with the encroachments of foreign powers into the province. His ruthless suppression of the Boxers and his well-disposed accommodation with foreign powers were problematic for his contemporaries and posed a conundrum for future scholars, who have offered diverse interpretations. More often than not, their assessments have been arbitrary, a function of their political stances. The resulting appraisals have not been fair; rather, they have reflected the changing national climate and shifting cultural circumstances.

Most twentieth-century readers were offered a haunting image of Yuan's years in Shandong: he was presented as a counter-revolutionary who butchered (*guizishou*) the Boxers without mercy. However, portrayals of him as a mass murderer betray the assessors' revolutionary mentality. Yuan's management of foreign affairs in Shandong, given the turbulent situation he faced – he was contending with an appalling series of foreign intrusions – marked him as a reactionary and as a running dog of the imperialist powers. He was trapped between the rising tide of the “revolution” and the invading foreign powers. His detractors claimed that as events unfolded, he sacrificed the Chinese people while satisfying the foreigners. Thus, he was dismissed as a villainous and unrestrained lackey (*e'nuhanpu*).¹

This negative assessment persisted for almost a century, during which the revolutionary historiography dominated. But in the past three decades, a new generation of reform-minded scholars has begun to re-evaluate this episode in Chinese history. Yuan is now seen in a more positive light – as a talented administrator who brought stability to Shandong and who tried to prevent a full-scale invasion by foreign powers. His actions transformed a grimly chaotic situation into a time of undisturbed peace for the province's people. Having accomplished that, he defended the land, brought peace to its inhabitants (*baojing'anmin*), forestalled foreign encroachment, and thereby brought tangible benefits to the Chinese nation.²

THE REPRESSION OF THE BOXERS

From primary documents, one may be sure that Yuan took a negative view of the Boxers as soon as he was named acting governor of Shandong in December 1899. He would hold to that view after he was appointed governor in March 1900, and he would maintain it after he left for his new position as the governor general of Zhili in November 1901. During his two years in Shandong, Yuan differed markedly from Empress Dowager Cixi in that he always regarded the Boxers as bandits. On arriving there, he excoriated the Boxers as troublemakers. In a private letter to his friend Xu Shichang, he remarked that “the Boxers are actually bandits who engaged in a conspiracy while assuming an anti-Christian guise.”³ His unequivocal view came from four facts: the Boxers disturbed normal social life, kidnapped and killed, robbed and seized, and burned and destroyed. “They used anti-religious banner to amass people and to seize property.”⁴ With local officials' connivance, the Boxers had spread like a wildfire. In Yuan's view, the Boxers had to be eradicated as quickly as possible.

Yuan analyzed the origins of the Boxer Uprising from a unique angle. According to him, the fundamental cause was foreign missionaries' interference in local administrative and judicial affairs, which placed local Chinese officials under pressure. Whenever a judicial case between converts and non-converts arose, the missionaries unconditionally supported the former. Chinese officials grew inured to this coercion and simply conceded to the requests of foreign religious workers. Ordinary Chinese who felt bullied by this rose up in retaliation, which inevitably led to conflict. Exasperated by such cases, Chinese officials tried to recruit the non-converts to wreak vengeance on both converts and missionaries without

regard to the grave political, social, and diplomatic consequences. In this climate of chaos, bandits exploited anti-Christian sentiment, energizing large gangs of local people to seize, burn, and loot.⁵ To Yuan, the Boxers were bandits who were leading the country astray and causing havoc among the people (*wuguoyangmin*).⁶

Yuan Shikai refused to associate himself with anti-foreign officials, including his predecessor Yuxian, whose xenophobia had inspired the Boxers. As a result of that xenophobia, more than eight hundred Boxer sub-groups had emerged in Shandong during Yuxian's brief governorship. Faced with intense clashes between 150 foreign missionaries and their converts in 1,500 churches on one side and nearly 1,000 Boxer branches on the other, Yuan as the new governor arrived at a two-pronged solution: a "fundamental" one (*zhiben*) and a "phenomenal" one (*zhibiao*). The former involved reconciling Christian converts with ordinary townspeople and peasants, as well as adherence to the relevant treaty clauses and strict administrative supervision. Laws were to be enforced with an eye towards justice, and foreign missionaries would no longer be allowed to intervene in legal cases. The phenomenal solution was meant to pacify the land by eliminating the "bandits" and guiding townspeople and peasants along the right path for social stability. The two solutions were to be applied both alternatively and simultaneously to resolve the grave crisis.⁷

In Yuan's mind, the ultimate objective of his governorship was to achieve and maintain social order. He had witnessed the destructive behaviour of the Boxers, and official documents signed by Yuan indicate his concerns about security. He lamented the cacophony of voices concerning the Boxers, but those voices did not distract him from his goal of pacification. Throughout his two years as governor, he offered no support, demonstrated no acquiescence, and showed no mercy to the Boxers, whom he always viewed as troublemakers. He did not adopt Cixi's utilitarian approach of co-opting the Boxers to expel the foreigners, nor did he simply assume other officials' indifferent neutrality. His immediate focus was on restoring peace and stability, and he did not waver in that objective, which was, in his own words, "to eliminate the bandits in order to restore peace for the people [*zhifei'anmin*]."⁸

To bring about a long-term reconciliation between converts and non-converts, Yuan circulated notices throughout the province's cities, towns, and villages in which he promoted a cordial relationship: converts and non-Christians alike were Chinese and should live together peacefully as neighbours. He made it clear that his duty was to protect both and to treat them equally by standing firmly in defence of the law. As for foreign

missionaries, Yuan depicted them as moralist tutors who had travelled to China from afar and should be protected according to Chinese imperial edicts and treaties signed between the Imperial Court and foreign governments. Yuan advised local civilians to separate themselves from the Boxers, who promoted evil teachings and harassed the populace under an anti-Christian guise. He declared that he would do his best to root out all bandits. He even ordered the posting of easy-to-understand poetic verses to propagandize his mission to re-establish civil tranquility.⁹

Yuan also introduced a measure encouraging Christians to give up their beliefs and to re-engage with mainstream society, in a process he called “recanting” (*huijiao*). Meanwhile, all church property would be confiscated, at least for the time being. When this policy was carried out, some local officials abused it, forcing believers to give up their faith, sometimes under torture. When foreign envoys pressed him to answer for these forced repudiations, Yuan replied with cautious diplomacy, stating that all church assets would be returned to foreign missionaries after the chaos had ended and declaring that coerced recanting was not what he had intended.¹⁰ Rather, the recanting measure was an expedient way to protect believers. In future announcements, Yuan made it clear that recanting was a personal choice and that intimidation was prohibited. He ordered local officials to nullify any official notices that mentioned forcible recanting.¹¹ It is hard to assess the impact of this policy, but it at least illustrates his plan for a long-term resolution to the civil discord.

Yuan believed that to crush the Boxers he would need to launch a propaganda war against their “heterodox” practices, which included charms, spells, spirit possession, and claims that they were invulnerable to bullets.¹² In Yuan’s view, the Boxers’ claims that bullets could not hurt them were a deceitful superstition, yet those claims had lured large numbers of peasants to their ranks. Yuan felt he must expose this. His concubine, Ms. Yang, witnessed a public demonstration of Boxer “invulnerability.” At a mass gathering, some Boxers showed off their power to prevent bullets from penetrating their bodies. Their “cooked” demonstration of this impressed the audience. Yuan immediately rose from his chair, pulled out his pistol, fired at the master, and called on him to rise. Unfortunately, that man never rose again. Yuan immediately declared that the master and his followers were mere bandits whose dishonesty was luring people to follow the wrong path. Yuan’s act had a strong impact in that it demonstrated that the Boxers were not morally advanced civilians but villainous outlaws.¹³

To suppress the Boxers, Yuan deployed his modernized army and local military forces to occupy strategic locations throughout the province, such as mountain passes, transportation routes, and vital intersections. The stationing of troops at key locations was intended to strike fear in the Boxers. It was also meant to sever their communications, impede their mobility, and prevent them from spreading their ideology. The troops were ordered to collect information, interrogate passersby, arrest anyone suspicious, and patrol their territories. All this weakened the Boxers who were now less able to manoeuvre.¹⁴

For especially infected areas, Yuan banned large social gatherings and ordered large crowds to be dispersed. When a martial arts training centre was found, it was immediately destroyed and its assets were confiscated. Those who promised immediately not to join the Boxers again were instantly set free and forgiven their past actions. Yuan often used the phrase “quenching” (*tanya*) when instructing his officials, officers, and troops to quash gatherings of Boxers. He was lenient with rank-and-file members as long as they pledged no further activities, but he was stern with their leaders. By his rules, leaders who spread evil teachings among the people were to be killed. Leaders who gathered together more than twenty people not their own kin were to be killed. Leaders who organized bands of looters and who resisted arrest were to be killed. In these ways, Yuan warned the local population not to join the Boxer Uprising.¹⁵

Yuan Shikai realized that military means alone would not be enough to solve the Boxer issue, so he launched a province-wide mass mobilization to deal with potential Boxers. He required that local elites not support the Boxers and encouraged them to organize militias (*xiangtuan*) to combat them.¹⁶ Within a clan or a village, the clan head or village leader was responsible for the safety of the local populace. A head or leader who failed to report or helped to hide a Boxer was to be jailed for one to three years. A family head who hid a Boxer was to be jailed for five years. Anyone who captured a Boxer leader and surrendered him to the authorities was to be awarded two hundred taels; the same amount would be paid for capturing five rank-and-file Boxers and sending them to the government.¹⁷ Yuan required fathers to warn their sons and elder brothers to warn their young brothers not to join the Boxers; the government’s orders were to be followed.¹⁸

Yuan stuck to this draconian approach, legitimizing it by citing the threat to social stability and arguing that the Boxers had already destroyed the normal social order. He also pointed to the threat of foreign intervention, for the Boxers’ irresponsible actions were likely to encourage foreign

powers to intervene on the pretext of exterminating the bandits, which would lead to still more violence and destruction.¹⁹ Yuan's anti-Boxer policies were harsh but effective. On one occasion, a military commander hesitated to stage an attack against a Boxer village of seven hundred souls in eastern Shandong. Yuan, infuriated, ordered an immediate bombardment, declaring that he would accept all responsibility for the consequences. This battle killed many, but it also showed Yuan's firmness.²⁰ It will never be known precisely how many Boxers died under Yuan's orders in Shandong Province. He claimed that his troops killed four thousand, but another estimate sets it as high as thirty thousand. Today, scholars believe that four thousand or a little more is closer to the reality.²¹ Yuan's actions led to deaths in Shandong, but not as many as in the fighting between the Qing army and the Eight Power expeditionary forces in the Beijing-Tianjin area in 1900.

ACCOMMODATING FOREIGNERS

When Yuan Shikai assumed the governorship of Shandong in the midst of the national crisis, he also had to deal with foreigners on the province's soil. In 1898, the Germans seized Qingdao and its bay and the British occupied Weihaiwei. Both signed treaties with China to obtain special privileges around those two areas. Internal troubles intertwined with external aggression to make the province a focal point of the country. Shandong's strategic location during this grave national crisis compelled Yuan to emphasize the province's vital role. He described it as "the throat" of China, because of its location between the north and the south of the country and between the imperial capital and the rich Yangtze Delta.²² Yuan had two general options for dealing with the imperialist powers. One was to do what so many conservative politicians did, which was take the xenophobic stance of supporting the Boxers and attacking the foreigners. The other was to suppress the Boxers and protect the foreigners to avoid unnecessary international entanglements. Yuan selected the second option and courted foreign missionaries and diplomats.

Yuan had developed his ideas concerning the defence of Shandong even before becoming governor. Between May and July 1899, he was ordered to move his troops into Dezhou to block any German aggression. In his report to the Imperial Court in July 1899, he emphasized his strategy to contain the Germans within the concession area by applying the Sino-German leasehold treaty to justify China's sovereignty, by

stationing troops in certain areas to forestall German movements, and by selecting competent officials as negotiators to reach favourable deals. All of this would ensure effective containment. Yuan's military forces outnumbered the two thousand German troops in Shandong, but his goal in this was not to start a fight. Throughout his governorship, containment would be his main strategy.²³

Having carefully studied the foreign powers in Shandong, Yuan believed that the Germans posed the biggest threat, although the British occupation of Weihaiwei needed to be dealt with as well. In Yuan's view, the British presence, mainly along the Lower Yangtze, counterbalanced that of Russia in Manchuria. It followed that Shandong was not going to be a British priority. In Yuan's observation, the Germans were the most dangerous foreigners for they had built up colonial authority around Qingdao. The Germans were also trying to intervene in local political affairs; furthermore, they had brought forward many religious cases, which had contributed to the Boxer Uprising. Yuan believed that he must guard the province against the Germans and that to do so he would have to contain their power around Qingdao.²⁴

To achieve this containment, Yuan deployed his troops to encircle Qingdao. He established a military headquarters in Qingzhou, deployed five battalions in Weixian, and placed two battalions at Gaomi and two more at Juzhou. All these units maintained close contact among themselves and could coordinate with one another as the need arose: "As the Germans saw our well-arranged military deployment directly targeting Jiaozhou [Qingdao], they dare not split their troops for other audacious and opportunistic invasions. Even if they divide their troops to occupy other seaports, our troops can directly attack their headquarters in Qingdao. With such a powerful counterbalance, we can reach our objectives without fighting a single fierce battle."²⁵ Scholars today describe his strategy as "forestalling" the Germans (*fängde*), a term reflecting his intention to contain them.²⁶ Yuan sent spies to monitor German movements. In early June 1900, when he received a report that the Germans had posted another four hundred soldiers to Qingdao, he perceived it as a threat and instantly dispatched 3,200 soldiers from Jinan to the front line to block a possible German advance.²⁷

However, Yuan intended to mute any possible conflict with the German military and tried his best to prevent the escalation of hostilities. The Gaomi incident is an example. Under an 1898 treaty, the Germans had the right to build a railway line in Shandong. In June 1899, when they began building it, a clash took place between the Germans and local peasants

in Gaomi County, during which more than twenty villagers were killed. Yuan's investigation found that local fears of flooding had led the farmers to destroy part of the railway line. Yuan sent troops there to inform the local villagers that the railway construction had been endorsed by the Sino-German treaty. He promised to extend help to the local populace in the event of flooding, but he also ordered the arrest of the leaders of the riots. Had he not done so, the Germans' opportunistic expansion might have led to more disasters. Yuan claimed that his move precluded a broader conflict with the Germans.²⁸

Yuan's suppression of the anti-German riots in Gaomi seems to confirm the long-held view that he was an imperialist lackey. However, it was never his intention to surrender Chinese sovereignty beyond the clauses of the treaty. On March 21, 1900, once the dust had settled, he signed a railway contract with the Germans, and a mining contract as well. In these two contracts, Yuan detailed specific regulations for the purpose of protecting Chinese interests. For example, railways and mining were not to hamper civilian farming activities, damage public facilities, destroy private tombs, or harm the local population. In the event of damages, the local villagers were to be compensated for their losses. Outside the concession areas, the Chinese would provide troops to safeguard security. More importantly, the railway line and mining facilities could be purchased by the Chinese state after negotiations.²⁹ According to one German scholar, these detailed regulations actually deprived the Germans of most of the privileges they had seized. Recent Chinese scholarship argues that the contracts helped China regain her lost national interests.³⁰

Yuan's approach to containing foreigners within the concession areas was accompanied by other methods of restraining them. Within the concessions, Chinese negotiators (*jiaosheguan*) attempted to solve particular cases with the foreign authorities. If a case did not involve foreigners, the foreign authorities were not to intervene. Any foreigners who desired to travel or do business in Shandong had to obtain a six-month valid passport (*huzhao*). The boundaries of the concessions at first were not marked well, and this often led to conflict, as occurred in Weihaiwei in 1900, where some local villagers died. Yuan tried to suppress the riots, but he also dispatched an envoy to work with the British to establish a boundary line by erecting stones around the concession zone. The special envoy carried Yuan's order to persuade local villagers to abide by the treaty, to stop planning riots, and to avoid further disputes.³¹ Beyond the concession boundaries, Yuan was firm that not even "an inch ... should be compromised."³²

One of the toughest challenges Yuan faced was how to handle anti-Christian cases (*jiao'an*). The first such case he solved was the Brooks case. Sydney M.W. Brooks (1874–99), an Anglican priest, was murdered by a group of villagers in Feicheng on December 30, 1899, a few days after Yuan's arrival in Jinan. Yuan intended to settle such cases with the foreign authorities fairly and quickly in order to restore peace in the local community and build trust with foreigners. After a shuttle of diplomatic notes and face-to-face negotiations, the Brooks case was resolved in about three months. According to the agreement, Shandong would allocate nine thousand taels to build a church on the spot where Brooks was murdered; also, five *mu* (3.125 acres) was given to the church, a commemorative stele was erected, the local magistrate was dismissed, and the chief murderers were executed. As he solved these cases, Yuan gradually relieved the mounting pressure.³³

Yuan informed Chinese as well as foreigners that it was his duty to protect the missionaries and their property. Missionary work was legal, besides being safeguarded by the treaties, and the missionaries' presence was to be respected. He circulated notices warning the local villagers not to harm foreign religious workers and indeed to protect them. Violations would be severely punished.³⁴ He also promised that foreign missionaries who refused to respect the treaties and who did not abide by Chinese law would not be tolerated. Such foreign individuals would be penalized through diplomatic means.³⁵ During the Boxer crisis in the summer of 1900, Yuan assigned troops to escort foreign missionaries travelling to the coastal cities and to other safe places. American reporters remarked that "he [Yuan] protected foreigners journeying to the coast and for that he deserved all credit." Another news story written by American reporters, dated July 19, 1900, said that "the friendly attitude of Governor Yuan was of course a prime factor in the safe withdrawal of so many."³⁶ During the crisis, not a single foreigner was killed in Shandong; in contrast, 159 foreigners were slaughtered in Shanxi.³⁷

In the second half of 1900, Yuan did his best to prevent the Eight Power expeditionary forces from entering Shandong. He communicated with foreign diplomats, missionaries, and other dignitaries to persuade them not to enter his province, for the Boxers had already been exterminated in Shandong. At the same time, he convinced Li Hongzhang to reach a deal whereby the foreign expeditionary forces would not cross the Shandong–Zhili border.³⁸ To show the provincial boundary, Yuan ordered stone pillars to be erected along the border. He also ordered his troops there not to fight the foreign forces even if they entered. Rather, the foreigners should

be treated politely and sent away cordially.³⁹ The expeditionary forces never entered Shandong; even so, their moves touched a tender nerve with Yuan, and he dispatched spies to watch their movements.⁴⁰

After the Boxer troubles had ended, Yuan was perhaps one of the first provincial governors in northern China to welcome foreigners to return under the protection of the treaties. In a telegram to the central government on March 10, 1901, he reported that “the Germans in Shandong have already resumed their railway construction and mining business. Many dozen German missionaries have arrived back in the interior land. All activities are peaceful and normal as no signs of disturbance can be spotted.”⁴¹ In another telegraph to regional leaders a few days later, he was elated to relay that the situation in Shandong was serene, noting that “Germans are now inside the territory of Shandong. They all come back in accordance with the peace terms. Nor did any irritating troubles occur.”⁴²

GOVERNING THE PROVINCE

Most who are familiar with Yuan Shikai's governorship in Shandong link it to his suppression of the Boxers and neglect his management of the provincial administration. In those turbulent two years he was undoubtedly consumed by the need to suppress the Boxers. That said, he also oversaw routine provincial affairs, handled unexpected civilian issues, offered famine relief, trained more troops, worked with the Imperial Court, coordinated with other provincial governors, and implemented progressive reforms. We should not exaggerate Yuan's achievements, but neither should we ignore them. Let us discuss a few aspects of his rule in Shandong Province, which was teeming with crises by the time he arrived.

Under the existing imperial system, one of Yuan's most important tasks as governor was to assess the performance of his personnel, conduct regular reviews, make recommendations, and promote or demote people. To that end, he recruited talented officials, oversaw their performance, elevated good administrators, and terminated or demoted incompetent ones. He once remarked: “If a region begets a good official, the whole region tends to be peaceful while the locals benefit. If the region receives a bad official, the whole region witnesses emerging treacherous and corrupt administrators while bandits roam over the land.”⁴³ To gather reliable information about a local administrator, he often dispatched two investigators who did not know each other and who would collect data

separately about the same person.⁴⁴ After receiving their reports and other relevant information, he would determine whether to promote, demote, or dismiss that person. For talented and competent officials, he often used the term “rule-breaking” (*poge*) when upgrading their ranks or elevating them to higher positions.⁴⁵

Yuan Shikai is now generally regarded as a responsible, diligent, and effective governor.⁴⁶ His actions as a manager tended to be swift and firm. Within half a year of his arrival he had recommended that four talented officials be named county magistrates; he had also censured ten magistrates, some of whom were removed or demoted.⁴⁷ He was ruthless when it came to unfit officials but tended to be open-minded when it came to gifted and proficient ones. He viewed narrow-mindedness as a plague that led to dissension in officialdom. He himself could work with those who had once accused or impeached him; this is usually viewed as evidence of his magnanimity. For example, when Yuan arrived in Shandong, he learned that Hu Jinggui, who had impeached him in 1895, was now working there as the provincial judicial superintendent. When they met, Yuan assured Hu that he would not be influenced by the past and indeed expected them to have a healthy working relationship.⁴⁸ In his memorial to the Imperial Court on April 6, 1900, Yuan spoke highly of Hu: “Hu Jinggui, fifty-two, a *jinsshi* holder, assumed the post as the provincial judicial superintendent in July 1899. He is simple, honest, and diligent; and he often feels sincerely obligated to carry out his duties.”⁴⁹ In 1901, when Hu was accused of being in league with bandits, Yuan defended Hu in his report to the central government: “Hu is straightforward, honest, incorruptible, and upright. He is free of any blemishing stains ... He never patronized any bandits ... and the accusation is unjust and wrong.”⁵⁰

Yuan respected local customs and endeavoured to set an example for the local people. There was no change in institutions, nor was there any mass participation in governance; however, Yuan tried to find common ground in order to encourage local contributions. For example, on May 13, 1900, he approved a request to establish a memorial archway in Zhaoyuan County, to be dedicated to Zhang Chengheng’s late mother. Zhang had emigrated to Daxing near Beijing and donated one thousand taels for famine relief in Shandong. In allowing an archway, Yuan was respecting local culture and encouraging others to follow suit.⁵¹ On May 27, 1901, Yuan approved the building of a memorial shrine in Yantai to honour Liu Hanfang (1840–98), a former prefectural governor. During his tenure, Liu had cared for the local people, promoted commerce, refurbished urban areas, and built hospitals. More importantly,

he had bravely organized resistance to the Japanese invasion during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95. When Weihai fell, about five thousand soldiers fled to Yantai. Liu reorganized them, pacified the local populace, and offered aid to the needy. Liu and his wife prepared two tables in his office hall on which two poisoned drinks were placed. Liu intended to sacrifice his family if the Japanese seized Yantai. His bravery inspired the soldiers and the local populace to fortify the city, and as a consequence, Yantai was unscathed by the war. Liu died in 1898, but his patriotic spirit lived on, and Yuan respected the local people's wish that a shrine be built to him.⁵²

An important task for Yuan was to provide relief for his people from natural or human-made disasters, such as flooding, drought, pestilence, and social disturbances. Joseph Escherick argues that the Boxer Uprising was caused partially by a huge number of hungry refugees and millions of helpless migrants in Shandong.⁵³ Famine relief was meant not just to solve the problem of hunger but also to stabilize local communities and prevent social unrest. Noting that the famine relief program had expired while people were still suffering, Yuan petitioned the central government on March 19, 1900, to extend the program for one more year. In that petition he emphasized the scope of the natural disaster and the magnitude of the people's suffering and promised to strengthen relief efforts in the following year. He distinguished emergency aid (*jizhen*) from long-term relief (*puzhen*) and prioritized the former.⁵⁴ Yuan believed that the springtime relief (*chunzhen*) was the most crucial because of flooding and crop failure during the previous year; thus, he ordered that relief funds be allocated to the villagers in the spring.⁵⁵

With regard to disasters, the paramount problem was the flooding of the Yellow River. Yuan observed that "the Yellow River tends to be narrow in Shandong and often generates danger because its river bed is higher than the nearby countryside due to the thick silt and abundant deposits."⁵⁶ During the early spring, "the delta region is still frozen because of the icy wind coming from the open sea. However, the upper part of the river thaws first, pushing the rushing water downstream. At the bends, ice piles up like hills to block the water-flow. The danger thus comes into being."⁵⁷ Before 1891, Shandong's annual budget for river control was set at eight hundred thousand taels, but in 1892 it was reduced to 600,000 taels. By the time Yuan assumed his position, it was hard to justify the smaller amount.⁵⁸ In the summer and fall, heavy rains caused the river to overflow, breaking the levees, flooding the land, and turning millions into refugees. To control the river, the levee system had to be well maintained.

Where breaches occurred, they needed to be plugged quickly. Often a second levee was needed. To handle breaches, Yuan sometimes went in person to the spot to enact a solution. For example, when the levee at Wuyangjia, Huimin County, suffered a breach in 1901, Yuan went there and mobilized the available manpower and resources to stop it. To his relief, the hole was filled after a few weeks' hard work.⁵⁹

Yuan was able to expand his military power during his governorship. By Qing tradition, a provincial governor assumed command of the local military. Yet Yuan's case was different, in that when he was appointed governor of Shandong he brought his newly trained modern army of seven thousand men. The province already had military forces, including the Green Standard (*luying*; thirty-two battalions with 13,679 soldiers) and the Braves (*yongying*; thirty-four battalions with 15,000 soldiers).⁶⁰ However, Yuan observed that those forces lacked discipline, possessed no fighting ability, were poorly funded, and behaved like rabble.⁶¹

Yuan eliminated unfit members of the existing forces and organized the good ones into a new army of twenty battalions. This new army would be trained and equipped with modern weapons. The budget for the old units was shifted to the newly organized but much smaller army. To raise the funds to train it, Yuan established a medicine tax, a land tariff, a salt tax, a railway management fee, and other revenue generators. Taking this route meant that the reorganization did not add to the central government's financial burden. It also enabled him to create a second new army, which he named the Vanguard of the Right Army (*wuweiyoujunxianfeng-dui*).⁶² Yuan merged the Jiangnan Self-Strengthening Army of 2,860 men with this Right Army. Thus by mid-1900, Yuan commanded two modern armies with a strength of about twenty thousand soldiers. Fortunately for him, his Right Army and the Vanguards were untouched by the ferocious fighting in the Beijing-Tianjin area, where in 1900 the forces under Ronglu were mostly annihilated by foreign troops.

Two events Yuan took part in during his governorship are still controversial. One was his tacit support for the Southeast Mutual Defence (*Dongnanhubao*), initiated in June 1900 by several local administrators in the Lower Yangtze region, including Zhang Zhidong and Liu Kunyi. They reached an understanding with the foreign authorities in Shanghai to halt the spread of the Boxer Uprising to southern China. Under this informal accord, they guaranteed non-aggression, mutual protection, and reciprocal support between those Chinese provinces and the foreign concessions. For decades, this pact would be condemned as unpatriotic, for it amounted to collaboration with foreigners, tended to be sympathetic to

the imperialists, and halted the Boxers' penetration into southern China. In sum, those provincial administrators had assumed a hands-off stance with regard to the war in the north. It is said that Yuan dispatched a telegram to the British consul in Shanghai to show his support for the accord, which of course was anathema to the central government that in June 1900 had ordered the use of the Boxers to fight the foreigners.⁶³

The other controversy involved Yuan's sluggish military aid to the Beijing-Tianjin area. When the central government requested reinforcements, Yuan did send troops, but their snail-like advance attracted criticism. He began by dispatching Sun Jinbiao and his two thousand troops in June, but Sun's unit was called back after a few days.⁶⁴ In July, the Imperial Court ordered Yuan to dispatch his reinforcements immediately. He responded by sending Xia Xinyou's three thousand men marching towards Tianjin.⁶⁵ But by the time Xia reached Cangzhou, Tianjin had already fallen to the foreign forces. Yuan listed numerous reasons for the slow advance of his troops, including hot weather, summer diseases, exhaustion, transportation problems, the Boxers' harassment, and insufficient supplies. Because of his procrastination, Yuan was accused of betraying the nation and of trying to turn Shandong into his personal fiefdom.⁶⁶ Others censured him for preserving his military forces by saving them from annihilation at the hands of far superior foreign troops.⁶⁷ Yuan probably had many reasons for moving slowly, and in that regard we must also consider the serious situation in Shandong that he had to address.

All this might suggest that Yuan's relations with the Imperial Court were strained. The reality, however, was different. As the foreign forces approached Beijing, Cixi and Emperor Guangxu fled to Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, and then to Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. At this point in the crisis, Yuan was not a centrifugal force. He made his concern clear by offering financial aid as well as provisions to the large imperial entourage. When Cixi and Guangxu arrived in Taiyuan, Yuan collected three hundred thousand silver taels and ordered them to be delivered by a special escort of officials, officers, and troops on August 29, 1900.⁶⁸ He also ordered the delivery of large amounts of tribute in the form of silk, cloth, and other necessities.⁶⁹ Wang Wenshao, Grand Councillor, who accompanied the imperial entourage, remarked that "Shandong was the first to send urgent needs and all that arrived were especially appropriately fitting to the imperial demands, which both the empress dowager and the emperor gracefully recognized."⁷⁰ Yuan's continued support carried imperial favour. During the national crisis, after the telegraph lines and

railways around Beijing had been destroyed by the Boxers, Yuan's office in Jinan served as the "mail room" for the imperial edicts, official documents, and regional reports between the central government and provinces. No wonder some referred to Jinan as the second Imperial Court and a national political nerve centre.⁷¹

The assertion that Yuan Shikai launched the New Administration or New Policy (*xinzheng*) is justified. When the central government proclaimed its reform plan, Yuan responded enthusiastically.⁷² On April 25, 1901, he offered his suggestions to the Imperial Court; among other things, these included political reforms to promote an efficient bureaucracy, educational reform for practical learning, financial reform to raise revenue, military reform for a strong military, and anti-corruption reform to increase public trust.⁷³ His temporary leave after his birth mother's unexpected death curtailed his reform actions; even so, he was able to implement a number of reform projects. Besides initiating modern military training, he engaged in the following fields. In terms of education, he ordered that a Western system for practical learning be established, including elementary schools, middle schools, and universities. He petitioned to build China's first provincial university, which was founded in 1901. For that institution, he hired both Chinese and foreign educators. He admired American missionary M.W. Hays (1857–1944) as a moral paragon and an erudite man, and hired him as the first provost of the university, which evolved into what today is Shandong University.⁷⁴ Hays excelled at his post; sadly, he died in a Japanese internment camp in Shandong during the Second World War.

In the economic realm, Yuan stressed the importance of commerce. He criticized the traditional discrimination against merchants and praised them for the vital role they played in the national economy. He cited the West's favourable treatment of merchants and urged his compatriots to follow that model. In late 1901, Yuan approved the establishment of the Commercial Bureau (*shangwujū*) to promote regional businesses, encourage local commerce, enhance the quality of native products, and enrich provincial markets.⁷⁵ He also understood the significance of coin mintage and feared that the wide circulation of German currency along the railway line would damage China's national interests. He dispatched a special envoy to Japan, whose remit was to examine that country's banking system and purchase minting machinery and printing paper. All of this led to the founding of the Mintage Bureau (*yinyuanju*) for the purpose of forestalling further German financial penetration into Shandong.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

Yuan Shikai's brief tenure as governor of Shandong coincided with a double national crisis: an invasion by Germany and Britain, and the Boxer Uprising, which originated in the province. By the end of the nineteenth century, Shandong was viewed as the most unstable, most unpredictable, and least manageable province. Indeed, between 1897 and 1899 a series of four governors had tried to rule Shandong and had quickly failed. Yet the province was strategically vital to China because of its location, and Yuan understood that the nation could not be secure unless Shandong was. At this critical moment, Shandong needed a strong leader. Yuan was just that, for he commanded a modern army and possessed the skills necessary to manage the province decisively and with foresight.

Yuan's governorship was controversial. For forcibly suppressing the Boxers, he earned the nickname "the butcher." By accommodating imperialist foreign powers, he forestalled their invasion, though his apparent tolerance of them caused many to view him as their lackey. These negative labels were by-products of China's long revolutionary historiography. As the revolutionary movement fades into the past, the Chinese have now begun to value Yuan's role in stabilizing Shandong; indeed, he is now being praised for his administrative ability and applauded for bringing about social stability, regional peace, and progressive reforms. He prevented a bloody war in Shandong and was the first politician in China to use treaties to safeguard national interests.⁷⁷ To defend the waning empire, he worked diligently to carry out his duties. He refused to align himself with the anti-foreign rebels, recognized the validity of the treaties signed by the central government, defended the land in a multitude of ways, and promoted reforms. The results were striking. Li Hongzhang noted that "the Beijing-Tianjin area was troublesome, but Shandong was undisturbedly serene."⁷⁸ It is said that Li strongly recommended that Yuan be named as his successor for governor general of Zhili Province, although some question whether he did.⁷⁹ Whatever the case, Li's death in late 1901 provided an opportunity for Yuan to embark on a new political life.

Perhaps it is proper to cite the comments of early-twentieth-century Chinese writers on Yuan's career in Shandong. One remarked that

the people in Shandong hated Christian bullies and mostly sympathized with the Boxers for their anti-foreign ideas. Seeing Yuan Shikai's forcible suppression, they became furious and condemned him as a national

traitor ... After the catastrophe ravaged the Beijing-Tianjin area, however, the popular attitude suddenly changed, as people began to praise Governor Yuan incessantly. The elites from Beijing and Tianjin who sought refuge in Shandong and who congregated in Jinan felt that they had found a safe haven ... Whenever Governor Yuan is mentioned, nobody would refuse to grant him accolades as the mascot of Shandong and a great man of China.⁸⁰

7

Governor General of Zhili and Imperial Minister

In the twenty-first century, many readers are amazed by Yuan Shikai's groundbreaking reform projects during his years as the governor general of Zhili (Hebei) and as an imperial minister from late 1901 to early 1909. An examination of his reforms counters the negative image that continues to stick to him. In their immediate aftermath, his reforms in Zhili were deliberately ignored and his "dark" side was often amplified to expose his supposedly evil nature. His negative image was further reinforced by derogatory comments intended to expose his vices as well as his counter-revolutionary activities. Those anti-Yuan bombasts were not groundless, but they were exaggerated, reflecting the revolutionary mentality of the times. Yuan, after his eight years as an influential late-Qing official, was portrayed as power-hungry, as a prominent comprador who compromised national interests, and as a heinous villain who quashed the people's uprisings.¹ One writer put it plainly that Yuan owed a debt of blood to the Chinese people for ruthlessly suppressing the Jing Tingbin Rebellion in 1902.² Another writer claimed that Yuan was so powerful that he built his own "personal sphere of influence in North China."³

The past three decades have witnessed a sweeping change in the assessment of Yuan's activities during those years. He is now credited with many achievements. This reversal of the historical verdict mirrors recent changes in the nation as a whole, as China experiences a dramatic transformation away from the formerly radical outlook of revolution towards a much more moderate temperament of reform. Yuan is now praised as a proponent of modernization, a contributor to national progress, an

efficient administrator,⁴ and a dedicated instigator of modernization projects.⁵ One scholar asserts that Yuan “achieved historical feats during the time that he was the governor-general of Zhili.”⁶ This strikingly new positive view of him has consigned the old negative appraisal to the historical scrapheap while underscoring Yuan’s accomplishments.

Historical assessment is a complicated task, and views change from one era to the next. In this regard, the recent positive evaluation has arisen from the robust national appetite for reform. Yuan’s reforms are now acclaimed, and he is being exalted for his positive impact. Yuan was one of China’s most influential politicians: he served as governor general of Zhili and as Superintendent of Trade for the Northern Ports (Beiyang Minister) (*Beiyangdachen*); he also held eight other concurrent positions with the rank of imperial minister.⁷ As his duties expanded, so did his power, and his reforms exerted a greater influence. He suppressed the Jing Tingbin Rebellion and accommodated foreigners by honouring the treaties the Qing had signed. And as soon as he arrived in Zhili he launched a series of progressive reform projects. Within a few years he had turned Zhili into a model province. This chapter analyzes how he stabilized war-torn Zhili, evaluates his modernization projects, appraises his military power, and assesses his accommodation with foreign powers.

RESTORING ORDER

What Yuan inherited as the acting governor general and then governor general of Zhili was a devastated province. The 1900 war was over, but foreign occupation continued, social disorder persisted, demographical dislocation was roiling civil society, natural disasters struck continually, and diverse threats were frequent. To be a governor general near the capital was a daunting task. The first thing he did was restore order. To that end, he had to deal with two different groups. The first was foreign: troops, diplomats, residents, and merchants. The other was Chinese: civilians, officials, troops, rebels, and others. To accommodate the foreigners, he acted in accordance with the basic ideas stipulated in the treaties. He ordered that all of the treaties China had signed be collected for his officials to read. China had been defeated calamitously by eight industrial powers and should strive not to provoke them again by blundering into new, unnecessary confrontations. He promised not to overstep the treaties and instructed his officials to use them as tools when dealing with foreign powers, for he did not want to surrender any national interests unless the country was

bound to do so under the treaties.⁸ To bring back normal order, he set out to rebuild a stable life for the people, uphold imperial rule, and eliminate latent dangers.

Needless to say, the presence of foreign troops posed the largest headache. Yuan needed to persuade the foreign authorities to withdraw them. The problem was that under the new treaty, the powers were allowed to station troops along the Beijing-Tianjin corridor. The unprecedented foreign military presence within Yuan's jurisdiction made for precarious relations, even after a large number of foreign troops had been withdrawn in the wake of the Boxers' defeat. Yuan's approach was to protect the local populace, prevent the foreigners from permanently acquiring land, and thereby bring back stability. In previous years, foreign troops had occupied civilian property without permission, both houses and land, sometimes squatting in premises from which the owners had fled. As the dust settled, problems arose. The process of retrieving occupied properties dragged on for years, during which Yuan ordered diplomatic negotiations for their return along with accrued rental charges.⁹ Yuan demanded that his subordinates bring him detailed information about the acreage of land and the number of houses foreigners occupied. He then reported this information immediately to Chinese diplomats so that they could request the return of those properties.¹⁰ Paradoxically, some foreigners received imperial medals at Yuan's recommendation. For example, a German who saved Chinese lives during the turmoil in 1900 was granted a private meeting with the emperor.¹¹ This was one of Yuan's tactics for changing foreigners' behaviour and for promoting good conduct. One French commander who managed his troops well and did not harass the locals during the war was bestowed an imperial medal at Yuan's behest.¹²

Having reviewed the host of problems arising from clashes between Chinese and foreigners over the previous decades, Yuan attempted to confine foreign residents to the concession areas within Tianjin, which were in effect small semi-colonies where the foreign powers exerted significant control. Since those privileges had been granted by the treaties, Yuan had to honour them. But he also had to handle the newly established Italian concession in the Yantuo District of Tianjin. The Italian request for a concession had been approved by the Imperial Court, and Yuan had to comply with the Sino-Italian agreement. However, the real headache sprang from the fact that the boundary of this concession had not been clearly defined. In Yuan's mind, the periphery needed to be clear-cut, for China could not afford to lose more jurisdiction. He paid particular attention to

the well-being of Chinese residents.¹³ In 1902, he requested protection for Chinese subjects' houses, land, and property in the Yantuo District. Any relocation would have to be compensated and partly paid by the Italians, and transactions needed to be conducted fairly.¹⁴

Yuan tried to accommodate rather than resist. This approach would of course be denounced by pre-1980s historians, but today it is viewed as part of "the rational struggle" (*lixingkangzheng*) to uphold national interests.¹⁵ Here are several examples of Yuan's struggle to maintain national jurisdiction. The Tianjin concessions were located in a busy commercial district, but those concessions were divided by the Haihe River. In 1905, Yuan approved the building of an iron bridge near the Austrian and Italian concessions.¹⁶ According to the plan, the bridge crossing the waterway would be China's property and would be built, managed, and protected by the Chinese. Those who crossed it would not be charged, and the construction expense of 125,000 taels would be apportioned among the local Chinese administration (37 percent), the Austrian and Italian concession authorities (27 percent), and the tram company (36 percent). In 1906, when it was completed and opened to the public, Yuan named this structure the Golden Soup (*Jintang*) Bridge.¹⁷

Yuan saw a pressing need to monitor and control foreigners' movements in the Chinese interior. Foreign travellers had to hold valid passports, and any foreign merchant had to carry a special licence issued by the Chinese government. Foreigners were not allowed long-term residence, nor were they allowed to rent houses or build warehouses beyond the concessions.¹⁸ Foreigners were also prohibited from purchasing land. In 1904 an illegal land transaction was detected in Zunhua, where a local Manchu had sold land to a Russian bishop. Yuan promptly took action, branding this a case of illicit selling by an unscrupulous proprietor (*jian-mindaomai*).¹⁹ He refused to accept any excuses and immediately nullified the deal. He also ordered the owner to return the money to the bishop and arrested five Chinese citizens as lawbreakers.²⁰

Yuan realized that to maintain social order, he would have to forestall conflicts between Christian converts and non-believers – after all, it was such conflicts that had caused the Boxer Uprising. Time and again, he ordered the posting of notices condemning the Boxers, who had instigated the uprising, incited foreign invasion, made China suffer, and brought about unprecedented disaster. He warned pro-Boxer individuals to repent, and he made it clear that he would not tolerate heretical teaching, illegal martial arts training, or unlawful gatherings. He specified penalties for sympathizers, including capital punishment, imprisonment,

property confiscation, monetary fines, and other penalties. He would reward anyone who reported a bandit to the officials.²¹ He declared that he would protect the church, but he warned Chinese converts not to take unlawful action against non-believers or fellow believers, pointing out that “the struggle between a convert and another convert tends to be more violent.”²²

Yuan's suppression of Jing Tingbin's Rebellion in 1902 was viewed as anti-revolutionary by pre-1980s historians; Yuan himself maintained that his goal in this was to *uphold* the imperial order. In his letter to Xu Shichang of March 25, 1902, he defended his actions: “Since the national disaster, the state authorities are not yet revitalized and treacherous men are prone to initiate new rebellions. If they are not suppressed, I fear that other rebels will follow suit and disturb the national situation.”²³ Whether Jing Tingbin (1861–1902) was a revolutionary or a bandit depends on whom one asks. Primary sources point out that Jing was reacting spontaneously to popular grievances over new taxes. Jing, a *juren* holder, was part of the local elite and had myriad reasons to challenge the government. Perhaps the hated new taxes should be blamed, for they were imposed at a particularly difficult time for the populace. In other words, he was spurred to action by the initiator. Moreover, the fact that within just a few weeks of March 1902 Jing attracted thousands of followers suggests that popular discontent was already strong. Jing's actions were not peaceful: he razed churches, murdered a foreign missionary, and launched political demands against the Qing Empire and foreign powers. The riots soon spread to Julu, Guangzong, and Weixian counties.²⁴ From Yuan's perspective, Jing was simply a rebel and a traitor. Yuan's suppression was swift: within a few months he had captured and executed Jing. After that, Yuan never faced another major local uprising.

Accusations that Yuan exploited the situation to promote himself are not totally absurd, for he did curry favour with Cixi as a result. It was Yuan who arranged the return of the Imperial Court to the capital. It was he who offered substantial financial support to the imperial entourage. It was he who in person accompanied Cixi and Emperor Guangxu back to Beijing in 1902. But the primary sources reveal that his overall intention was to stabilize the national situation. As Yuan stated, the return of the Imperial Court was significant because it symbolized the restoration of national order. Soon after, Yuan arranged an imperial visit to the East Mausoleum (*Dongling*) to re-establish the royal dignity.²⁵ To foster loyalty to the dynasty, he requested that a shrine be established to Nie Shicheng and other heroic leaders who had sacrificed their lives battling the foreign

troops in 1900. Besides recognizing those heroes, this action targeted the entire nation with its appeal for loyalty, dedication, and patriotism.²⁶ At the same time, he petitioned for the punishment of Dong Fuxiang (1840–1908), the commander of the Gansu Army, because Dong's army had harassed the people, behaved like bandits, and committed numerous crimes in 1900. Instead of resisting foreign troops, Dong's men had fled from them and looted in Zhili Province. By liquidating its recent internal enemies, Yuan intended to restore the legitimate order of the empire.²⁷

After the national disaster of 1900, Yuan was determined to re-establish peace and to bolster the people's confidence in the government. Thus whenever natural disasters struck, he used his administrative power to comfort the local population. In 1902, he entreated the Imperial Court on behalf of eleven counties and prefectures where previous years' flooding had badly damaged local harvests. He requested the delay or cancellation of taxes so that the people in the stricken areas could enjoy a respite at such a hard time.²⁸ In 1904, he made the same petition on behalf of flooded areas in other counties.²⁹ And he several times took the initiative in offering emergency relief.³⁰ The Yongding, the longest river in Zhili, often turned into a raging torrent during the rainy season. One year an especially bad flood took place. Yuan was able to have all the resulting breaches plugged by late 1904 so that the next year's harvest would not be impacted.³¹ Yuan helped strengthen public charity and civic-mindedness by highlighting exemplary models. In Hengshui in 1900, a member of the local elite named Zhang Youmei fortified his village, trained a militia, built a school, and donated more than two thousand taels to the local community. Yuan awarded him the title of philanthropist and allowed the building of an arch in Zhang's honour.³² These local manoeuvres were for the purpose of restoring imperial order.

A PROGRESSIVE REFORMER

Stephen R. MacKinnon employs the word "miracle" to depict Yuan's accomplishments in restoring order in Zhili.³³ He argues that Yuan retained close ties with the Imperial Court, from which he obtained his authority to stabilize the province. Yuan did in fact solidify his authority through his tenacious ties with the rulers. He differed from conservative politicians in that he sought to renew, strengthen, and enrich the empire under the traditional framework. He was spurred to do so from having witnessed first-hand national defeats and widespread poverty. As a guardian of the declining

empire, Yuan was an ambitious and resolute administrator. His flurry of reforms amounted to a thorough makeover of the status quo, a radical change in the old order, and a swift disruption of traditional ways. Indeed, his administration was a time of rapid institutional, economic, and social transformation that turned Zhili into an exemplary province.

In response to the insecurity that followed the war, Yuan created China's first modern police force. When he assumed his job of governing Zhili, he made Baoding his headquarters before relocating it to Tianjin in 1902. In previous years, foreign occupiers had established a quasi-government to maintain order and collect taxes. This foreign authority was disbanded when Yuan re-established sovereignty. The treaty of 1900 specified that Chinese troops could not be stationed within a 10-kilometre perimeter around Tianjin. To solve this problem, Yuan selected three thousand soldiers to form the first modern police force in Chinese history. Those policemen, along with Yuan's officials, entered Tianjin to replace the foreign authorities in 1902. This temporary expedient became a permanent institutional change. In late 1902, emulating the Western system, Yuan founded a police college; he then staffed it with foreign instructors. He proposed to pay policemen well and partitioned them into constabularies with a hierarchal order for meritocratic promotion. To Yuan's satisfaction, "two years after the establishment of the police force, it became institutionalized. As a result, bandits disappeared while people enjoyed peace."³⁴ With Yuan's encouragement, the central government created the Department of Police (*xunjingbu*) in 1905 and appointed Xu Shichang, Yuan's friend, as its first minister.³⁵

To achieve stability and order, Yuan propounded his own approach to hiring qualified officials in Zhili. To start, he attempted to end bribery. In particular, he rescinded a practice that allowed subordinates to present their superiors with gifts, often large sums, during the holiday seasons. Instead, Yuan proposed to pay officials high enough salaries that they would have no need for outside support. Second, he eliminated redundant and titular positions. The Tianjin County administration employed more than three thousand bookkeepers, runners, bailiffs, and servants. Yuan ordered that only 250 of them be retained so as to make the county administration efficient and effective. He also established a training school to enhance officials' managerial capabilities. The Zhili Political and Law School invited foreign instructors to train officials in modern administration and political science. Some Zhili officials were sent to Japan to examine Japan's administrative system.³⁶ Yuan ordered the performances of local officials be supervised, and he developed a mechanism for

awarding those who did effective work and for punishing those who were unfit. During the six years from 1901 to 1907, he impeached and demoted forty-one county magistrates and recommended seventeen qualified ones for promotion.³⁷ Although the ultimate power to remove or appoint officials was in the hands of the Imperial Court, qualified individuals became provincial bureaucrats under Yuan's recommendations, including noteworthy individuals such as Yan Xiu (1860–1929), who supervised education, and Zhou Xuexi (1866–1947), who handled finance.

Yuan Shikai's efforts to abolish the Civil Service Examination System were praiseworthy. He and other ministers petitioned the Imperial Court to eliminate the old system, which had been the central government's main channel for selecting officials. It had created China's meritocracy, but by the turn of the century it had become a barrier to modernization, for it did not place any emphasis on science, technology, and practical learning. Yuan argued that "if the Civil Service Examination System is not abolished, the modern school system cannot thrive ... China will never be strong and will not be able to compete with powers."³⁸ In this way, he linked the old system with the nation's weaknesses. At first he proposed that the role of the examination system be reduced; later, however, in 1905, he collaborated with Zhang Zhidong, Zhao Erxun, and others to persuade the Imperial Court to eliminate it completely. In the end, the abolitionists won out and a new path to modern education lay open.³⁹

Yuan's conviction that talent and ability could only flower in a modern school system motivated him to popularize the Western-style school system. He adjusted provincial taxes and allotted them as a fund to support the newly established learning centres. At one point he donated twenty thousand taels to encourage the local elites to follow suit.⁴⁰ He ordered the hiring of foreign teachers, especially from Japan. Soon, one-third of the Japanese teachers in China were employed in Zhili.⁴¹ To fill the needs of local schools, Yuan established normal schools to produce qualified teachers. The education system followed the Western model, with the university at the top, secondary schools in the middle, and elementary schools below. The curriculum tended to be comprehensive, with a combination of Chinese learning and Western learning. The sciences, foreign languages (English), and maths were given a special place.⁴² After Yuan's efforts, Zhili by 1907 had built 8,723 schools with a total enrolment of 164,000 students, which means that Zhili was one of the top two provinces in establishing a modern education system.⁴³ In terms of school assets, Zhili ranked first in the nation.⁴⁴ Yuan promoted a study-abroad program that utilized both state funding and private sponsorship.⁴⁵ He then appointed returned students to important

positions. He did not want to lose the potential of returned students, and at one point he proposed setting up a compulsory five-year service requirement in Zhili for returned students whose studies abroad the province had funded.⁴⁶

According to Yuan, “Zhili’s soil is not rich, which leads to poverty. Unless we utilize our favorable geographical advantage to revitalize agriculture, we cannot sustain our population and balance our budget.” He matched his words with actions. In 1902, he established the Agricultural Bureau (*nongwujū*) and hired Japanese experts as instructors. He dispatched officials to go to Japan to purchase modern farm equipment. He required Zhili’s cultivators to learn new farming skills and to study modern agricultural techniques.⁴⁷ An agricultural college was established in 1902 as well as an experimental farm for developing new crop hybrids and improving local soils.⁴⁸ Yuan ordered that the first agricultural association (*nonghui*) be organized to promote research programs, information acquisition, and other activities.⁴⁹ Some regions were ordered to engage in commercial-crop agriculture to strengthen the local economy. In Gaoyang County, the farmers were persuaded to plant cotton, and by 1909, that county had become a famous textile centre.⁵⁰ Yuan also paid attention to forestry and understood its importance to environmental protection, climate enhancement, and timber provision. He encouraged the introduction of the Norwegian pine and ordered that it be planted in Zhili according to Norwegian methods.⁵¹

Yuan advocated a number of economic projects to promote a vigorous market, stable finances, and booming enterprises. The first thing he did was stabilize the market after the catastrophe of the 1900 war. He had arrived in Zhili at a time of unprecedented economic crisis: inflation was soaring and markets were in upheaval. He established a bank to issue a new currency. He asked the people to treat merchants with respect, and his government reduced the tax burden on merchants to help them survive the depression. He also punished those officials who exploited merchants. He encouraged the local elites to invest in the new, Western-style industries (*shīyè*), including paper-making, light bulb manufacturing, pipe making, cement production, and tobacco growing, and he created commercial chambers to regulate production, distribution, quality, and marketing. All of these are now seen as contributions to China’s economic modernization.⁵²

As he reformed the economy, Yuan had to protect China’s national interests with regard to mines and railways. In eastern Zhili, many mining areas had been occupied by foreign powers during the war. Yuan now

tried to have them returned. Having learned that the Kaiping Coal Mine had been illegally sold to Britain by Zhang Yi, a local official, during the foreign occupation, Yuan impeached Zhang three times in the Imperial Court. He also brought a lawsuit to a British court in London.⁵³ When these efforts did not resolve the problem, he ordered the construction of the Kailuan Coal Mine as a way to protect China's coal-mining industry. Although his plan was not a total success, he had shown his determination to safeguard China's mines.⁵⁴ With regard to railways, the major trunk lines had been built as joint ventures but in practice were under foreign control. He tried his best to purchase those lines back. At the same time, he rejected foreign intervention when new rail lines were constructed. When he planned the Beijing-Zhangjiakou Line, he declined British and Russian offers to invest. He was determined to build it using Chinese capital and employing Chinese engineers. For four years beginning in 1905, he sought funding while minimizing the costs. He hired Zhan Tianyou (1861–1929), a returned student from the United States, as the chief engineer.⁵⁵ Zhan lived up to Yuan's expectations, overcame the construction difficulties, and completed the railway line in 1909.⁵⁶

A brief but significant pendulum swing occurred in the late Qing when constitutional reforms were launched. Yuan was a driving force behind them, pushing them as a means to salvage the declining empire. It was Yuan who proposed in 1906 that five ministers be sent overseas to study modern constitutions in Japan and the West. He played a key role in selecting those ministers, and he endorsed their post-visit report.⁵⁷ Some scholars contend that he was merely angling for promotion, but more scholars now believe that he had a reformer's mindset, leaned towards Western models, and dreamed of constitutional rule.⁵⁸ In a 1907 memorial, he posited that constitutional rule would enhance China's image, help consolidate imperial power, attract talented people to state employment, forestall violent revolution, promote social harmony, and win the people's hearts.⁵⁹ Manchu nobles would foil this reform; even so, Yuan's efforts earned him a reputation as "the father of China's constitutional reform."⁶⁰

Even though the constitutional reform did not achieve its idealistic goals, one component of it left an enduring legacy: autonomy for Tianjin. Yuan was enthusiastic about implementing this reform and dispatched local elites to Japan to study regional autonomy. He established a local autonomy research institute and built a local autonomy bureau to prepare for the 1907 election for the Tianjin Assembly. voting qualifications, such as a voting age of twenty-five, ownership of two

thousand taels, a clean criminal record, and personal fitness.⁶¹ Two hundred thousand voter registration forms were printed for a total provincial population of 418,215.⁶² Because of a rumour that participants would be levied a special tax, many refused to register. As a result, only 70,000 forms were picked up, and only 13,567 were filled out and returned. A review shows that 12,461 individuals qualified as voters, constituting 3 percent of the total population, while only 2,572 were eligible for the assembly. The election started in mid-June and ended in late July of 1907. On August 18, 1907, thirty people were elected to form the assembly.⁶³ This election would have a long-term impact, in that Tianjin local autonomy continued until the 1920s.⁶⁴ As soon as the election was over, Yuan congratulated those who had been elected and stated that the process was a model for Zhili as a province and for China as a nation. This newly created local autonomy program amounted to a structural breakthrough, for it allowed limited yet popular political participation as well as a multi-layered power framework. Yuan had been the prime mover in this election, which was unprecedented in Chinese history.

Yuan's reform projects included social and legal programs, such as a new judicial system and a prohibition against opium smoking. One area in which he protected women deserves attention. In 1903, he enumerated four flaws in the foot-binding tradition: it maimed the woman's body, impeded her educational pursuits, impaired her reproduction, and harmed her professional advancement. He persuaded the people of Zhili to abandon this old tradition at a pace he termed "gradual liberation" (*zhujianjiefang*).⁶⁵ He encouraged women to attend school. He emphasized the importance of obstetrics, for only by paying attention to it could "life be respected and children and mothers be benefited."⁶⁶ In 1906, he took action to protect female servants, who were often abused with impunity. He ordered that the victims be placed in state custody and that the abusers be punished according to the degree of injury.⁶⁷

YUAN'S MILITARY POWER

While serving as governor general of Zhili, Yuan Shikai continued to reform and modernize the military. Over the preceding decade, he had trained a modern army, but his military activities, while breaking with the old tradition, tended to be regional. Now that the Imperial Court had empowered him to reform the military as a concurrent minister, he began to spread military modernization throughout the country to improve

China's fighting capabilities. Between 1901 and 1907, Yuan's military work focused on this new phase of military reform, which included adopting a new military system, increasing the military's size, and expanding military education. His moves resulted in the formation of a large military group known as the Beiyang Army (*beiyangjun*) or the Beiyang Block (*beiyang-jituan*), which would dominate China for more than two decades until Chiang Kai-shek's rise in the late 1920s.

Yuan began his military institutionalization in 1902 after successfully petitioning the Imperial Court for further military reforms. Under his plan there would be three related military forces: the regular army (*chang-beijun*), the interminable army (*xubeijun*), and the backup reserve army (*houbeijun*).⁶⁸ These three armies were interconnected; soldiers would serve in them in a nine-year rotation – that is, a soldier would serve each army for three consecutive years (the backup reserve army would later require four years). When a soldier was promoted to officer, the chain was broken, for he would stay in the regular army for a longer time. Yuan set strict requirements for joining the army and ordered that each candidate's background be carefully scrutinized. A candidate required a recommendation from the local elite and also had to meet personal qualifications, which included being between eighteen and twenty-five years of age and possessing physical strength; he also had to clear a criminal record check and must never have smoked opium.⁶⁹ All the soldiers were to be paid according to their rank. Typically, a regular soldier was paid four to five taels (*liang*) per month. One-quarter of this sum was to be deducted; the rest was to be given directly to the soldier's family every six months. Three years later, the soldier would return to his hometown as a member of the interminable army; on doing so, he would be paid one tael per month and would be required to undergo one month of military training every autumn. After three years of this, he would become a member of the backup reserve army, for which he would receive half a tael per month, and would be required to take part in military training every other year. After these nine years, a soldier would become a regular citizen. During the military drills, a full salary would be paid. In the event of war, all three military forces would become imperial troops and be mobilized as such.⁷⁰

This innovative system replaced the traditional one. Noting that existing traditional forces had played a negligible role in the recent war, Yuan had decided not to rely on them. Instead he recruited healthy villagers as soldiers and refused to accept unfit candidates. As for the existing forces, Yuan gradually incorporated the competent soldiers into the new system

while terminating those who were unqualified – a process he referred to as gradual demobilization and absorption (*jiecicaibing*).⁷¹ It took Yuan a few years to incorporate the Yi Army, and only in 1905 was the process completed according to the principle of expelling the weak and keeping the strong (*tairuoliuqi*ang).⁷² He made it clear that the new army was a special imperial military force and should be respected as such. When he found that civilians were sewing their own military uniforms and dressing up like troops, he immediately issued an order prohibiting this and pledged to punish any violators, for their behaviour disrespected the new army.⁷³

Yuan Shikai's new army was trained on the Xiaozhan model but was also more structured. This army (*jun*) comprised two divisions; each division (*zhen*) had two brigades; each brigade (*xie*) had two regiments; each regiment (*biao*) had three battalions; each battalion (*ying*) had three companies; each company (*dui*) had three platoons; each platoon (*pai*) had three squads. The squad (*peng*) was the smallest military unit, with fourteen soldiers. Yuan equipped his army with modern weapons and outfitted it with secretaries, doctors, servants, and staff members. A logistics system to provide supplies was established. Modern communication tools, such as the telegraph, the telephone, steamboats, and railway lines became inseparable components of his military apparatus.⁷⁴

To sustain the expanding army, Yuan made full use of available financial resources. Appropriations from the central government, including the Board of Revenue (*hubu*) and the Board of War (*bingbu*), were of course the principal source of funds. Funding also came from savings from demobilized units, profits from recently established industries, provincial taxes, commercial funds, and even emergency relief funds.⁷⁵ When encountering budget shortfalls, he never sacrificed or delayed soldiers' salaries. To fortify the soldiers' resolve, he looked after the families of deceased soldiers. In late 1903 he ordered the building of the Shrine Exhorting Loyalty (*quan-zhongci*) to honour recently deceased soldiers, arguing that their loyalty to the empire and their exemplary behaviour were inspirational, even if they had not died in battle. This shrine cost one thousand taels, but Yuan ordered it built and found new funds to pay for it.⁷⁶

To unify the imperial military forces, Yuan in early 1903 proposed a Troops Training Administration (*lianbingchu*), which the Imperial Court approved that same year. This administration was meant to supervise troop training but it eventually became the nerve centre for all of the empire's military affairs. Yikuang, a Manchu prince, was its head in name only;⁷⁷ in reality Yuan was in charge, and thus the de facto supreme commander of China's military forces, the supervisor of national military

operations, and the policy-maker for military affairs and personnel. Before it was integrated with the Department of the Army (*lujunbu*) in 1906, the Troops Training Administration enabled Yuan to manage China's military affairs. He benefited from this position in that his troops obtained a huge amount of funding from it. According to a recent study, 78.3 percent of the military expenditures flowing in from other provinces through the Troops Training Administration went to train Yuan's men. In 1905, of the available nine million taels of military funds, six million went to Yuan's army.⁷⁸

Yuan was troubled by the shortage of competent commanders and took action to establish more military schools. He had built military schools within his barracks in the past, but those could only be called military classes. Li Hongzhang had built a military school in Tianjin, but it was destroyed in the 1900 war. According to Yuan, "China does not lack soldiers but it has a shortage of commanders. China does not lack loyal and brave generals, but it is insufficient in talented and knowledgeable commanders."⁷⁹ Yuan proposed founding a series of military schools. At first, those schools – most of them in Baoding – were temporary and had the immediate purpose of training officers to meet urgent needs. Then in 1903, Yuan created a ten-year military educational system that included three years of elementary military school, three years of middle military school, and three (later four) years of military college. When a two-year practicum was added to this, the entire system lasted about twelve years. The term "elementary" is misleading, for this school accepted students between seventeen and twenty-five.⁸⁰ The curriculum included literature, language, history, mathematics, and science in addition to military courses. Yuan sent the best students to study military science abroad, especially to Japan. Among those who were sent to Japan was Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), the future Nationalist leader, who had studied at the Baoding Military Academy. The move yielded an unexpected result: some of those sent to Japan, including Chiang Kai-shek, would become anti-Qing revolutionaries.

Yuan's military force expanded significantly between 1901 and 1907. The Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), which was fought by foreigners on Chinese soil, turned out to be a windfall for Yuan, for it accelerated the expansion of his forces until they doubled in size. As soon as military hostilities between the two powers started, Yuan proposed to the Imperial Court that China's military be enlarged for the sake of defending the capital and nearby provinces. By 1905, six military divisions, known as the Six Northern Divisions (*Beiyangliuzhen*), had been formed. The first division,

stationed in Beijing, consisted of reorganized banner troops. The second division was organized from the Zhili local forces, renamed the “second division” in 1905, and stationed in Baoding. The third division was established during the international crisis that attended the Russo-Japanese War, assumed its title in 1905, and was also stationed in Baoding. The fourth division, like the third, was organized around the same time from local forces in Henan, Anhui, and Shandong provinces, assumed the title “fourth division” in 1905, and was stationed in Machang near Tianjin. The fifth division was Yuan’s former vanguard team, which he had organized in Shandong; greatly expanded, it was renamed the “fifth division” in 1905 and stationed in Jinan. The sixth division was the backbone of Yuan’s original force trained at Xiaozhan, incorporated the Jiangnan Self-Strengthening Army, and was renamed the “sixth division” in 1905 and stationed in Beijing. By 1905, the six divisions had become the largest modern military force in China; they would be a political asset for Yuan in the years to come.⁸¹

In the midst of this expansion, Yuan Shikai believed there was a pressing need to launch nationwide combat manoeuvres to familiarize his soldiers with modern warfare. He organized two such exercises: one in Hejian, Zhili, in 1905, and the other in Zhangde (Anyang), Henan, in 1906. Each manoeuvre lasted for about a month from mobilization to wrap-up; however, the mock combat itself lasted only four days. During the first live-fire exercise on October 22–26, 1905, Yuan mobilized 22,513 soldiers, among whom two-thirds were his Beiyang troops. He divided the participants into a Northern Army and a Southern Army and demanded that they drill in a realistic war-like scenario.⁸² The second exercise, on October 20–24, 1906, attracted 33,958 soldiers, most of whom were Yuan’s Beiyang troops, although Hubei and Henan soldiers also participated. After each set of manoeuvres, Yuan submitted a detailed report to the Imperial Court in which he provided relevant information, summarized the successes, and suggested changes.⁸³ During the 1905 manoeuvres, about thirty-three foreign diplomats and journalists attended as observers. During the following year’s manoeuvres, forty-two foreign dignitaries went along as observers. The foreign journalists published articles in foreign newspapers praising Yuan for his commandership and his military reforms.⁸⁴

Because Yuan had built a modern military force, the myth grew that he was a warlord.⁸⁵ This widely circulated falsehood penetrated the popular literature, which condemned him for building a private army and for following in the footsteps of Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang.⁸⁶ Some

asserted that the Beiyang Army had become Yuan's personal tool.⁸⁷ Other writers were a little more courteous, referring to the Beiyang Army as Yuan's semi-private army.⁸⁸ This kind of evaluation started to change in the 1980s as more scholars began to focus on Yuan's significant contributions to China's military modernization. With the coming of this new attitude, the old view was quietly discarded. Like Stephen R. MacKinnon, Chinese scholars have come to view Yuan's Beiyang Army as a state military force under the financial and administrative control of the central government, and Yuan as simply its commander. In other words, he was a powerful reformist bureaucrat, but not a warlord.⁸⁹

FOREIGN MINISTER

Often ignored is the stretch of time that Yuan served as a member of the Grand Council with the special title of Minister of the Department of Foreign Affairs (*waiwubu*). It was not a long time, lasting only from September 1907 to January 1909, and he did not achieve as much as he did as governor general of Zhili. Nonetheless, he played an important role in imperial politics and built an international reputation. Nominally, his transfer from governor general to minister was a promotion; in reality, he lost his power base in Zhili and had to handle foreign affairs, which differed completely from what he was familiar with. Thus, his promotion has generally been regarded as an unexceptional event in his life.

It is hard to glorify Yuan Shikai's achievements as foreign minister. He took on the position at a time when the ministry was only a few years old. China had been thrashed repeatedly by the industrial powers in previous decades and was finding it difficult to establish a standing in the global community. For one thousand years, China did not even have a government organ to handle foreign affairs, for the Chinese regarded their country as the Middle Kingdom. The foreign ministry was established in 1901 and was in need of knowledgeable diplomats. Foreign affairs were now important because foreigners could be spotted in every corner of the empire, foreign troops were stationed around the Beijing-Tianjin area, foreign concessions existed in many cities, and foreign investment was rising. Yuan knew that his job was vital, but the empire's weakness allowed him little manoeuvring room and seemed to guarantee mediocre results. With the previous national defeats in mind, Yuan proceeded cautiously. Central to his job was finding ways to accommodate the modern powers to ensure peace. He recognized that any extreme moves would anger the

foreign powers and invite their intervention. In Yuan's view, the treaties had to be respected and existing privileges honoured. So he tried to defend China's sovereignty through diplomatic negotiations while refusing to sacrifice national interests any further.

Yuan had had experience in foreign affairs in Zhili. During the Russo-Japanese War, he promoted China's "neutrality" while taking actions to protect foreign interests so as to forestall foreign intervention.⁹⁰ During the war, he dispatched spies to Manchuria, known as "Fengtian detectives" (*fengtian*), to collect information for the central government. He persuaded the Germans to withdraw their troops from a number of areas in Shandong. During the 1905 boycott against American goods, Yuan opposed radical actions, advised the people to act cautiously, and recommended diplomatic negotiations to solve disputes. He argued that any unwise moves would "harm diplomatic ties and cause big losses to Chinese business circles." In his mind, the national interest had to always be taken into account (*yiweidaju*).⁹¹ Overall, Yuan exercised restraint as China's top diplomat.

Yuan's respect for the treaties attracted criticism; nonetheless, he continued to do what he thought right. As soon as he became foreign minister, he oversaw the enactment of two pre-signed protocols concerning railway construction and approved two contracts to carry out what the original texts required, but he also negotiated changes to those contracts. One of these concerned the Tianjin-Pukou Line, the other the Shanghai-Hangzhou-Ningbo Line.⁹² After a series of negotiations, facing mounting pressure from Britain and Germany and encountering Chinese nationalist demands that the protocols be abolished, Yuan proposed in 1908 to borrow money from Britain and Germany to build the Tianjin-Pukou Line and to negotiate a loan from Britain to construct the Shanghai-Hangzhou-Ningbo Line.⁹³ However, Yuan modified the original protocols by separating the loan from the construction, for he saw the two as separate matters. Yuan insisted that the management of the railway lines be under Chinese control, for sovereignty remained in Chinese hands. By taking this approach, he avoided clashes with the two powers. For revolutionary scholars, "Yuan served the interests of aggressive imperialist powers";⁹⁴ however, scholars recently concur that he served China's interests by making changes to the original protocols and retrieving rights that had been signed away.⁹⁵

Yuan Shikai's handling of a case concerning bandit raids on British ships on the Xijiang River in southern China shows that he worked for China's national interests. By treaty, the British had the right to navigate

that river. Unfortunately, some British ships were plundered by bandits. The British ambassador in Beijing lodged a protest. Yuan immediately took action and instructed local officials to suppress the bandits in order to prevent the British from “creating an excuse for intervention.”⁹⁶ He knew that this sort of a matter could lead to an armed foreign intervention, further endangering China’s sovereignty, so he ordered the pacification of the river and the arrest of bandits for the sake of avoiding a diplomatic incident.⁹⁷ He bluntly refused the British request that they be allowed to join the search for the bandits, asserting that “Xijiang is not a part of the high seas and that inland bandits are not lawless pirates”⁹⁸ on the high seas. Hearing that some local elites had organized an autonomous detective force, and were levying taxes and demanding a share of the customs revenue along the Xijiang, Yuan angrily labelled them “bad gentry” (*lieshen*) and ordered that they be punished, for their behaviours were disrespectful to the government and harmful to the social order.⁹⁹

Yuan consistently protected foreigners, especially Christian missionaries. In a telegram to a provincial governor he pointed out that “once a church is destroyed and a missionary is hurt, a compensation is requested and it inevitably involves governmental payment for it.” He ordered that churches be guarded and that missionaries be protected with meticulous care.¹⁰⁰ But he also insisted that no further privileges would be offered beyond what was stated in the treaties. For example, when Heilongjiang governor Cheng Dequan inquired about the tax-exempt status of a church, Yuan’s reply was absolute: since no church property was exempt, all churches must pay tax without delay, and the arrears were to be remitted instantly.¹⁰¹ Other foreigners whose governments had not signed treaties were treated like the Chinese. In 1908, a Turkish merchant holding the passport of a non-treaty nation was murdered in Changchun. When the French consul tried to intervene, Yuan’s order was clear: China rejected French involvement, because Turkey had never signed a treaty with China. Instead, the case would be handled fairly according to Chinese law to punish the perpetrators and avenge the victim.¹⁰²

The huge trove of primary documents issued by Yuan during his tenure as foreign minister includes his correspondence with frontier officials, with overseas Chinese ambassadors, and with diplomatic staff. A reading of these shows that he strongly defended China’s sovereignty by diplomatic means. When he heard that Russia had established a tax-collecting post in Lahasusu (Tongjiang) in Heilongjiang, a border town on the Chinese side of the Heilong (Amur) River, Yuan viewed it as an

infringement of Chinese sovereignty and requested that it be immediately relocated to the Russian side.¹⁰³ When bandits harassed the Sino-Vietnamese border, he demanded that local officials pacify the frontier by eradicating them. Only in this way, Yuan felt, could China avert clashes with the French authorities in Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ In terms of the Jiandao issue in Jilin Province, Yuan's attitude was firm: the land belonged to China, and Korean immigrants would be protected by Chinese laws.¹⁰⁵ He also declared that one island near the Philippines in the South China Sea belonged to China.¹⁰⁶

As large numbers of Chinese migrated to other countries, Yuan paid special attention to them. He proposed three protective measures: establishing consulates in more localities, building schools for overseas Chinese, and hiring overseas Chinese as Qing consuls. Yuan worked with foreign governments to negotiate the founding of consulates wherever a sizable Chinese community existed. By building schools, he intended to encourage Chinese descendants not to forget their motherland. Perhaps his boldest idea was his proposal that overseas Chinese be hired as Qing consuls.¹⁰⁷ Whenever overseas Chinese were harmed, Yuan would request that the culprits be arrested and that compensation be paid to the victims. As for Chinese coolies, he advised local officials to exercise caution when sending them out to other countries.¹⁰⁸ When coolies were maltreated, he worked with the foreign government to protect them. Yuan was vigilant about Sun Yat-sen's overseas activities, regarding him as "Traitorous Sun." He ordered Sun's journeys to be monitored and tried to persuade foreign governments to help him capture Sun.¹⁰⁹

Yuan tried hard to improve relations with Western countries with an eye towards forging alliances if possible. Because the empire was in decline, China might not be able to woo anyone to be its ally. Yuan steered Qing diplomacy into uncharted seas, feeling that China must seize every chance to make friends. In an interview with an American journalist, he expressed a genial attitude towards the United States, which he regarded as a friendly nation. He contended that the United States could help safeguard China's national sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹¹⁰ Japan having encroached on Chinese territory, Yuan attempted to build an alliance with the United States. He dispatched Tang Shaoyi to visit the United States in 1908 to explore a possible Sino-German-American alliance, as Germany had suggested. When Tang arrived in Washington, he learned that the United States had already signed the Root-Takahira Agreement, under which America and Japan agreed to adjust their respective colonial interests in the Far East. Needless to say, Yuan's plan was shattered.¹¹¹

CONCLUSION

The three sides of nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century, as Jonathan Spence elaborates, symbolized China's responses to the recent national crises. The xenophobic Boxers represented the extreme version of nationalism, and they failed. In their wake, Sun Yat-sen's Han Chinese nationalism targeting the Manchus became a dynamic force. Yuan Shikai's endeavours to modernize China embodied imperial nationalism. It is not difficult to see that Yuan was the vanguard of the empire. He tried to save the empire by recuperating, strengthening, and reshaping it. He wanted to make the empire effective, resourceful, and able to protect itself. His actions contributed to China's efforts to modernize. He prioritized myriad efforts to achieve economic growth and social stability and to advance the nation culturally and militarily. It is fair to say that Yuan was a progressive reformer, a talented official, and a masterful executive. He accomplished what he set out to do and pursued what China badly needed; thus, his work as governor general of Zhili should be viewed as a glorious page of his life. He was an eminent statesman whose reforms turned Zhili into a model province, and for this George Ernest Morrison has lauded him as a symbol of China's progress and as a vehicle of China's future.¹¹²

For his excellent service, Yuan was praised to the skies by the Imperial Court, especially by Cixi. To a certain degree, he was her trusted minister. Yuan worked diligently not only for her patronage but also for the empire. Those years were fraught ones for China: war had broken out, a foreign conflict was fought on Chinese soil, and many issues awaited solutions. It was during this period that Yuan was appointed to a multitude of concurrent assignments with manifold responsibilities. He did not shirk his difficult tasks; rather, he strained every nerve to carry them out. All of this tireless labour damaged his health. For years he experienced vertigo, forgetfulness, tinnitus, insomnia, and fever.¹¹³ Five times between 1902 and 1906 he requested that he be allowed to resign from his concurrent positions. The first four times, his requests were denied, but they were finally approved after his fifth appeal in late 1906.¹¹⁴ With his heavy duties, Yuan's poor health continued, and he requested two sick leaves in the summer of 1907. Fortunately for him, they were graciously granted.¹¹⁵

The Imperial Court sympathized with Yuan over his health and held him in high regard. Other high officials likely did not care for him at all. On the contrary, many accused him of being a shameless speculator and a potential usurper with a hunger for power. In China, impeachment was

an imperial mechanism of immense political significance, for it allowed officials to freely offer criticism and cast charges. Yuan was impeached many times by his political enemies. Early in 1903, Wang Naicheng accused him of holding too much power and warned the Imperial Court that the country would be ruined if this situation continued.¹¹⁶ Liang Dingfen impeached Yuan twice for holding paramount power and for committing unforgiveable corruption. During the 1907 Political Turmoil (*Dingweizhengchao*), as a result of Cen Chunxuan's manoeuvres, Yuan faced a crisis in his political career.¹¹⁷ In 1908, Zhao Binglin, Jiang Chunlin, and Chen Tian separately impeached Yuan for "harboring ill intentions." But Yuan proved to be a deft politician and was able to ward off the hateful charges and malicious intrigues.¹¹⁸

When he stepped down in early 1909, it was for a number of reasons. The death of Cixi on November 15, 1908, was a heavy blow, for she had been his patroness. As her protégé, Yuan had acquired enormous power. Before her death, anticipating (perhaps hastening) the ailing emperor's imminent end, Cixi had selected three-year-old Puyi as the next monarch, for whom his father, Zaifeng, would act as regent. Zaifeng hated Yuan, believing that his brother Guangxu's untimely death had been caused by Yuan's "betrayal." With Cixi gone, Yuan's fate was in Zaifeng's hands. Of course, Yuan's vast power fomented hostility among the Manchu nobles, who desired to see his downfall. Kang Youwei's overseas anti-Yuan campaign should be taken into account. As soon as Emperor Guangxu died on November 14, 1908, Kang immediately accused Yuan of regicide.¹¹⁹ One researcher has argued recently that the direct cause of Yuan's dismissal was his failure to forge a Sino-German-American alliance. Others, though, regard this failure as a minor factor and claim the reverse: that in fact it was Yuan's dismissal that led to the failure of this attempt at alliance.¹²⁰

Yuan Shikai's fall from the pinnacle of power validates MacKinnon's argument that Yuan did not rely on local power. It also proves that Yuan was not a warlord who maintained an unshakable regional base. Yuan's fall *does* point to a power struggle in the Imperial Court. It was inevitable that he would collide with the new ruler, who loathed him. His foreign friends, including American ambassador William W. Rockhill (1854–1914) and British ambassador Sir John N. Jordan (1852–1925), lodged protests but were unable to rescue him. Rockhill and Jordan argued that Yuan's role in modernization was indispensable, but their appeals fell on deaf ears and his departure saddened them.¹²¹ The Imperial Court's announcement of Yuan's "dismissal" (*kaique*) on January 2, 1909, stated that "Yuan Shikai

at this moment suffers from podiatric disease (*zuji*) and he has trouble with walking. Therefore, he is not able to perform his duties properly. The court's decision that he should be discharged from his positions and return to his native province to heal his illness reveals imperial concern and compassion." Behind the scenes, it was rumoured that Zaifeng had plotted to kill Yuan but was forestalled by Yikuang and Zhang Zhidong. Whatever the truth, Yuan's political life had come to a sudden stop. If history had frozen at this point, Yuan would have been remembered as a famous reformer who left an indelible mark on late Qing history. But his political career did not end here; he would resume it after this sudden eclipse.

8

Dismissal and Reclusion

Twentieth-century scholars who wrote about Yuan Shikai often neglected the period of his forced retirement from January 2, 1909, to October 30, 1911. During those years, Yuan fell down the political ladder and retreated to his native province, where he led the life of a recluse in a manor he had built for himself. There were many reasons for this scholastic neglect. First of all, primary sources were too few to allow a thorough exploration of his solitary years. Some deemed this period insignificant, because Yuan had lost his power, fallen far from grace, and withdrawn from politics. Some historians were reluctant to examine Yuan during those years, viewing this period as a barren one for scholars. Consequently, a lacuna has long existed in Yuan studies. From example, Jerome Chen in his biography of Yuan did address those years, but only by offering a brief sketch of Chinese history during Yuan's years as a recluse, and he offered no details about his private life.¹

However, in the past two decades, Chinese scholars have meticulously explored Yuan's activities during this period by delving into newly unearthed primary sources. This fresh interest has been sparked by the discovery of more than seven hundred of Yuan's private correspondences from those years, along with more than twenty of his poems, in addition to other new sources. Also, valuable original sources written by late Qing individuals who recorded Yuan's life have now been published. With these abundant materials, we can reinterpret Yuan's years of withdrawal. That said, scholars have reached no unanimous conclusions. They agree on the broad path of Yuan's life during those years but are plagued by

diverse opinions about contentious topics. For instance, scholars now realize that multiple factors led to Yuan's dismissal, and perhaps for that reason they have offered multiple conflicting accounts of how he lost his official position and was expelled from the capital.

In the new century, scholars agree that those years were an important transitional period in Yuan's life. His dismissal severely shook late Qing politics, but the circumstances surrounding it also paved the way for him to rise again later on. There is widespread agreement that Yuan's fall enabled him to sidestep a potentially vicious court struggle and helped him recover from his previous years' exhaustion. It also positioned him publicly as a victim of Manchu bullies and won him sympathy from his fellow Han Chinese. The popular perception that he was the Manchu nobles' scapegoat would help him during the anti-Manchu revolution that was on the horizon. During those reclusive years, he acted cautiously, established himself as a man dedicated to the local community, and mended his social networks. In a particular sense, the break did him good, for it was at the nadir of his political career that he found a circuitous path to its apogee. One scholar claims that without those years of political solitude, he would not have risen to become president of the Republic.²

THE CAUSES OF DISMISSAL

Scholars in recent decades have probed the causes of Yuan's dismissal from various perspectives. They have offered their critical analyses in myriad publications, although they are far from reaching consensus. Indeed, every point they stress invariably contains a kernel of truth. Their conflicting speculations regarding why Yuan fell suddenly from the pinnacle of Qing politics deserve our attention. After all, we cannot understand Yuan's second rise as a national leader unless we understand what caused his dismissal.

The most prevalent view of Yuan's fall is that it happened because he lost his patroness Cixi, who died in late 1908. In the imperial system, a minister's power depended on the patronage of the supreme ruler. Since 1898, Yuan had enjoyed a close tie with Cixi, the *de facto* ruler of the Qing Empire. It was Cixi who conferred on Yuan privileges, honours, and titles. She tolerated his bluntness and rebuked those who accused him of wrongdoings. In many ways, Yuan's upward mobility was a result of her trust in him. His close relationship with her determined his pivotal

role in late Qing politics. With Cixi behind him, he enjoyed remarkable proximity to the throne and was close to the centre of the imperial hub. The two of them cooperated to reinforce imperial rule and to promote late Qing reforms. But this special bond also rendered Yuan vulnerable, for the aged Cixi would die sooner or later. Indeed, Yuan was dismissed during the mourning period after her death. This was no coincidence; indeed, it was inevitable.³

Another prominent view is that Yuan's dismissal was an act of revenge. He had lost his patroness; even so, it was jarring how soon after her death he was deposed – within a mere few weeks. According to this view, his downfall was the retaliation of Zaifeng (1883–1951), the younger brother of Emperor Guangxu. Zaifeng had long despised Yuan for “betraying” his brother in 1898, especially given that Guangxu suffered thereafter from chronic pain and died prematurely, just one day before Cixi. Fortunately for Zaifeng, Cixi had selected his young son Puyi (1906–67) as the new monarch. Thereafter, Zaifeng would be the regent and the empire's “great decider.” Zaifeng's ascendancy only fuelled his desire to retaliate against Yuan. According to a widely circulated story, Zaifeng intended to kill Yuan, but his plan was halted by fear that doing so would backfire on him.⁴ The lack of primary evidence has prompted some analysts to disparage this claim.⁵ Whatever Zaifeng's inner turmoil, it is quite reasonable to argue that he inflicted harm on Yuan out of a belief that justice should be done. Indeed, it was Zaifeng who dismissed Yuan.

Some argue that Yuan was not forced from power, but resigned voluntarily. Yuan had a habit of toying with the issue of resignation, as he did a few times with Cixi. It was a way of expressing his loyalty to the Imperial Court and his indifference to power. Every time, though, his offer to resign only increased Cixi's firm trust in him. After she passed away, he cried so hard that he fainted in the imperial mourning hall. With her demise, the tide started to turn against him. Yuan knew that Zaifeng was an obstacle – that he would never be able to control him or find common ground with him. He clearly knew this, and in addition, he was a Han Chinese reformer while Zaifeng was a conservative Manchu noble. Sooner or later, the two would inevitably run afoul of each other and find themselves at loggerheads over difficult issues. Yuan was a cautious politician and did not want to be sacked, so he took the initiative and requested his retirement, and Zaifeng, who bore a grudge against Yuan, simply granted his request.⁶

Other scholars point to Yuan's failure to arrange a foreign alliance as a cause of his dismissal. He knew that forging alliances with rising foreign

powers could benefit China, and he was eager to establish an alliance with the United States and Germany. He dispatched Tang Shaoyi, an American-educated official, to the United States to explore the possibility. Unfortunately, to safeguard American interests, Washington had chosen to extend its recognition of Japan's gains in Korea in exchange for Japan's endorsement of American gains in the Philippines. Thus, an alliance with China and Germany was not on the American diplomatic agenda. Conservatives in the Imperial Court viewed Yuan's failure as a disservice to his country. Some Chinese saw Yuan's attempts to forge foreign alliances as unrealistic. To others, they had been a waste of time. To Qing officials, Yuan's "utopian" dream had amounted to a breach of duty, a miscalculation that had arisen from his own whimsical thinking. Tang Shaoyi returned from the United States empty-handed. Though we cannot know what the Chinese public of that day thought of Yuan's diplomatic performance, his failure to reach foreign alliances is now seen by some as a factor that led to his dismissal.⁷

Some scholars attribute Yuan's dismissal to the various ongoing impeachments. In imperial China, any official could be impeached by an anonymous accuser, and this often happened under the Qing. Impeachment was not a legal procedure; rather, it was a political mechanism that allowed officials to accuse other officials of wrongdoing, which could relate to anything. The impeachment process often involved a memorial sent to the Imperial Court requesting an imperial decision. In late 1908, a few such memorials were sent by Jiang Chunlin and Zhao Binglin accusing Yuan of possessing an evil heart, organizing a political clique, adopting an iniquitous scheme, holding paramount power, and harbouring sinister motives.⁸ These harshly worded attacks were unstoppable and were intended to wreak havoc on Yuan, or at least to strip him of his position and his military power. Some scholars claim that these constant impeachments compelled the Imperial Court to expel Yuan from the government.

Some scholars contend that the imperial power struggle during the late Qing is what led to Yuan's dismissal. Imperial politics was structured around one-man rule, which Western scholars refer to as "Ming-Qing despotism." However, factionalism in the bureaucracy below the emperor could be a painful torment for the monarch. Cliques of officials sometimes vied for power by winning imperial favour. These cliques would spar over a variety of issues, and their rivalry sometimes reshaped the administrative structure, as individual cliques gained power over specific areas. Yuan was the leader of the Beiyang Clique, which was the basis of

his political, military, economic, and diplomatic power. His clique sometimes collided with other cliques led by Zhang Zhidong and Sheng Xuanhuai. With the coming of Zaifeng, Yuan found himself pitted against a group of young Manchu nobles. In terms of personal capabilities, Zaifeng was no match for Yuan. However, the twenty-six-year-old regent wielded absolute power in the name of his young son. He saw Yuan's power as a threat to him and wanted no challengers in his son's court. So to avoid a fight, Zaifeng abruptly dismissed Yuan.⁹

Yuan's collapse could also be viewed as a consequence of ongoing Manchu/Han Chinese ethnic friction. The Qing dynasty had long been riven by ethnic tensions that pitted Manchu against Han. The endless disharmony came to a head in the late Qing era as more Han officials rose to high governmental positions, often as powerful provincial administrators. The Qing dynasty had been founded by the Manchus, and Manchu nobles saw themselves as having the right to strengthen their own dominance. It disturbed them that so many Han Chinese, including Yuan, were becoming prominent ministers. It also rattled them that Sun Yat-sen was resorting to anti-Manchu sentiment to launch a revolutionary movement; the Manchu nobles felt vulnerable to this and perceived Han officials as a threat. So they distrusted Han officials and viewed Yuan's reforms as part of an effort to hasten the empire's disintegration. It is said that young Manchu nobles urged Han officials to lodge impeachment complaints against Yuan and that some of these nobles actually implored Zaifeng to kill Yuan. Although these ethnic tensions did not spill onto the streets of Beijing, young Manchus indeed had rallied behind Zaifeng to press for Yuan's dismissal.¹⁰

Anti-Yuan efforts overseas led by Kang Youwei had an impact on Zaifeng's decision to sack Yuan, according to some scholars. Immediately after Emperor Guangxu passed away, Kang issued an anti-Yuan proclamation that accused Yuan of murdering the late monarch. Kang began his onslaught by accusing Yuan of bribing medical professionals to prepare poison, then sneaking into the Imperial Palace and killing the emperor, purportedly with his own hands.¹¹ Having charged Yuan with regicide, Kang expressed regret that Yuan still held unprecedented power.¹² Kang wrote Zaifeng a private letter, again holding Yuan culpable for the emperor's death and blaming Yuan for all national disasters. He advised Zaifeng to get rid of the evil culprit to avenge his brother, the late emperor.¹³ Scholars today agree that Kang's charge of regicide is groundless, for Yuan had had no chance to enter the Imperial Palace to do what Kang had charged. Kang, they maintain, was merely lashing at Yuan out of fury at

Yuan's "betrayal." It is unclear whether Kang's denunciations generated a response from Zaifeng, but it is safe to say that Kang's charge was heard and that perhaps it placed psychological pressure on Zaifeng, given that Kang was not an insignificant figure. Kang's advice that no mercy should be shown to Yuan may have motivated Zaifeng to expel Yuan from the government.¹⁴

Some recent scholars have ascribed Yuan's extravagant fiftieth birthday party in September 1908 as a cause of his dismissal. Although Yuan was forty-nine, he celebrated his fiftieth birthday according to the Chinese tradition of adding one year to his actual age. His home on Xila Lane in Beijing served as a grandiose stage for it. He had it decorated, and musicians and performers were hired for entertainment. Thousands of officials and visitors thronged his narrow lane and yard. Carts lined up in the nearby streets. According to one claim, the stores of Beijing, Tianjin, and Baoding specializing in birthday presents sold out,¹⁵ and Yuan's home was piled high with gifts. One foreigner who attended the party opined that Yuan was showing off his power.¹⁶ This grandiose celebration led to immediate troubles for Yuan, for it attracted accusations regarding his unmatched power, exorbitant lifestyle, and lavish spending. No wonder he was discharged from his position a few months later. Perhaps his sumptuous birthday festivities were one more factor among many that led to his dismissal.

RESPONSE AND REPERCUSSIONS

The edict for Yuan Shikai's dismissal came to him like a bolt out of the blue. He had three options in this situation: accept, resist, or escape. In the past, officials who had been similarly dismissed had faced house searches, confiscation of property, and even swift capital punishment. Facing this imminent danger, Yuan did not challenge the court. Even so, he had to think about his own safety and his family's well-being. Although there are quite a few different versions regarding his response, we can trace Yuan's actions after the imperial announcement. He went immediately to Tianjin, where he stayed in a hotel in the foreign concession. Flight was his instinctive reaction, motivated by the psychological blow he had suffered and by Qing historical precedents. According to one source, he tried to obtain help from Zhili governor general Yang Shixiang and was bluntly refused.¹⁷ In this desperate situation, he had no choice but to watch for whatever fate might befall him in Tianjin.

Yuan manoeuvred behind the scenes to make sure of his safety before taking any further actions. His son Yuan Keding visited foreign diplomats and foreign advisers including Walter C. Hillier (1849–1927), seeking assistance.¹⁸ Yuan Shikai's senior Manchu allies, such as Yikuang and Shixu, assured him of his personal safety. At this point, conflicting private records about Yuan's activities come to light, even though reliable official registers are insufficient. It is said that Yikuang strongly opposed Zaifeng's further moves to harm Yuan and that Zhang Zhidong rejected any extreme retribution. In other words, Zaifeng did not receive any senior politicians' support and could only rely on young Manchu nobles. Senior politicians saw Zaifeng's move as irresponsibly dangerous and protected Yuan, intending to stabilize the national situation.¹⁹

Yuan turned docile after being guaranteed his personal safety. It is unclear whether Zaifeng knew about Yuan's brief trip to Tianjin. If he did, Yuan could have explained that he had gone there to manage his private property. On January 4, 1909, Yuan returned to Beijing and paid a visit to the Imperial Palace to express his gratitude to Zaifeng for the imperial edict and to express his unwavering loyalty to the imperial household. In the political milieu of the era, this was crucially important: a dismissed official had to demonstrate his conformity to the imperial decision. From today's perspective, this ritual would likely be viewed as a false offer of thanks, given that Yuan actually was a victim and was concealing his own fear and anger. But the formalities at least ensured that Yuan's personal security would not be further jeopardized.²⁰

Yuan's dismissal astonished the public, which responded in diverse ways. Of course, he had many sympathizers. Many officials had been amazed at Yuan's achievements and moved by his sufferings and now offered their commiseration, though very few dared to stand up in his defence. Yan Xiu, an official in the education department, submitted a petition to the Imperial Court in which he went to great lengths to explain why he stood with Yuan. According to Yan Xiu, Yuan was a talented official who had contributed to the empire's well-being. He openly pleaded with Zaifeng "to retain this extraordinary talent in such a weak and deteriorating national situation."²¹ But Yan Xiu was one of only a handful of officials who voiced his opinion. His stance was not motivated by mere sympathy; it also arose from his conviction that Yuan could continue to contribute to the empire. Unfortunately, his petition was ignored.

Some think it meaningless to talk about the foreign reaction to Yuan's dismissal; others deem it insignificant. But in fact, foreign reaction

tended to be influential in Qing politics at that time. The United States and Britain protested against Yuan's dismissal. American minister W. W. Rockhill and British ambassador John Jordan requested a special meeting with Chinese officials, during which they expressed their concerns about the abrupt dismissal of a man who had carried out so many significant reforms. Rockhill's statement was bold: he argued bluntly that the dismissal would ruin China's reputation and smear China's image in the international community. The US and British governments reportedly asked the Imperial Court to provide a clear answer concerning Yuan's future political career.²² Zaifeng felt strongly pressured by these coordinated Anglo-American complaints, which indirectly shielded Yuan from any further punitive actions.

Yuan's rivals, meanwhile, gloated over his misfortune. Those officials who had long criticized Yuan were happy to see him go at last.²³ Kang Youwei and his clique celebrated the event, regretting only that Yuan had escaped execution. Young Manchu nobles were elated, because the dismissal had crushed Yuan's clique and cleared the way for them to rebuild their paramount power.²⁴ In the following years, they endeavoured to expel or push aside Yuan's subordinates, believing this would increase their power. Unlike the British and the Americans, Japan and Russia did not protest; indeed, they were delighted about Yuan's dismissal, for he had been trying to forge closer ties with the United States and Britain. In particular, Japan was glad to see Yuan step down and opposed any moves to call him back.²⁵

Most of Yuan's subordinates exercised silent caution. They realized that Yuan's dismissal had placed him in a miserable situation, but they also feared Zaifeng, and feared for their careers, and thus could not openly extend their sympathies. Under the prevailing imperial system, reticence was the best way for them to express their disaffection. When Yuan left Beijing for his home province on January 6, 1909, the scene at the railway station was depressing. In the past, he had been accompanied by numerous officials and guards, but now only a few close friends were there to see him off, including Yan Xiu, Najin, and Yang Du. According to recent research, some high-ranking officials had visited Yuan privately just before his departure. For example, it is said that Zhang Zhidong visited Yuan to express his sympathies. Saddened by the situation, Zhang worried about his own fate after Yuan's dismissal: "I will be impacted."²⁶ Zhang's coming death saved him from being humiliated like Yuan.

It is hard to gauge the response of Yuan's subordinates due to the lack of primary sources. The testimonies that do exist tell us they were angry about

Yuan's dismissal and that especially angry were the troops of the Beiyang Army who had been trained by him. Even worse, Yuan's confidants Duan Qirui and Zhao Bingjun were also soon dismissed by Zaifeng. Seeing what happened, "Yuan's old subordinates were extremely disturbed and horrified. They rolled up their sleeves, clenched their fists, and wiped their palms. They were vehement for a fight and fervent for an emergent action. This almost resulted in a great mutiny."²⁷ Before discharging Yuan, Zaifeng must have prepared for any military repercussions. We can assume that his emergency measures forestalled any armed sedition. At the same time, it is appropriate to argue that Yuan's dismissal had generated a strong backlash among the soldiers he had recruited and trained.

It is worth noting that the revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen were delighted about Yuan's dismissal, for it might splinter the Manchu regime and make it easier to topple in the near future. Sun remarked that "the seven military divisions stationed near Beijing were all established by Yuan Shikai. Because of his dismissal, the firmness of loyalty of those armies to the Beijing government was significantly weakened." Sun continued that "even though they [the troops] did not make any arrangements with us, we are sure that they are not willing to fight for the Manchu regime."²⁸ The more divided the Beijing government became, the more Sun would benefit. For Sun, whose revolutionary activities had already attracted the world's attention, Yuan's departure meant the exit of a formidable foe as well as a significantly crippled Manchu government. All of this would make it easier for Sun to launch a nationwide uprising.

Complying with the edict that he cure his gout in his native province, Yuan left Beijing for Henan. He had no clear destination there, except that it would have to be a proper residential area. Full of grief, Yuan returned home like a refugee fleeing his predators. The flight from the menacing political centre brought him joyous relief, even while the precarious future summoned feelings of desperation. From early January to early May 1909, he resided in Weijun, today's Weihui City. Unfortunately, he found that his "compound [was] too close to the busy market. Noises nearby could be heard. It is not healthy to spend the summer-time in such an unhealthy condition."²⁹ More inconveniently, Yuan's large family had to squeeze in together because of a leaking roof. Many of his children fell ill.³⁰ Beginning in early May of 1909, Yuan spent six weeks in another house, this one in Huixian. Although the situation there was better, in late June 1909 he decided to move again, this time settling in Zhangde (Anyang). Indeed, Yuan's road home was full of tribulations, and he struggled to find a new residence for nearly half a year.

The question naturally arises: Why didn't he return to his birthplace, Xiangcheng? Yuan's explanation was that "the houses at my native birth place are so few that they cannot host all of my own family members."³¹ Indeed, Yuan's retinue – wife, concubines, children, and servants – numbered more than two hundred men, women, and children. Recent studies show that a Yuan family feud was perhaps the real reason. When his birth mother passed away a few years before, Yuan intended to bury her alongside his birth father. His plan was thwarted by his half-brother Yuan Shidun, who insisted that Yuan Shikai's birth mother was a concubine and should not be buried with such honours. Yuan Shikai pleaded with his eldest brother, but Yuan Shidun would not budge, insisting that only his own birth mother, their father's true wife, should be buried with their father. Ultimately, Yuan Shikai chose another burial site for his birth mother. Yuan felt bitter about this clash for a long time. Naturally, he did not want to live beside his half-brother in Xiangcheng.³²

Yuan Shikai's decision to reside in northern Henan did not violate the Qing edict, for the region was part of his native province. The three places he resided, Weijun, Huixian, and Zhangde, were all close to a railway line and not far from Beijing. According to some scholars, Yuan had selected this area as a precaution and for political reasons. First of all, it would deflect any allegations of disloyalty, for he would be living very close to the capital, where the Imperial Court could more easily monitor him. Some suggest that he selected northern Henan so as to stay more closely informed about political happenings at the Imperial Court; this would help him restore his good name as well as his position. So he moved to Zhangde (Anyang) on June 28, 1909. He would live there until October 30, 1911.

A RECLUSE?

The imperial authority had ruled that Yuan Shikai could choose where he lived as long as it was in his home province. For two years and four months, he resided in Huanshang Village in the northern suburb of Zhangde. What factors determined that choice for him? This is a difficult question for which several answers are possible. At first, he had few alternatives, yet he believed that Zhangde was an ideal location. During his military drills a few years before, he had fallen in love with this city, situated as it was between mountains to the west and the plains to the east. In his words, this area possessed "a naturally spacious pastoral

environment which offers relative comfort and ... relaxation.”³³ Conforming to the traditional Chinese ideal, this area was blessed with appealing *fengshui*. More importantly, the area boasted a mix of old and new, urban and rural advantages, as well as serviceable lines of communication. Conveniently for Yuan, a relative who was a merchant in Tianjin owned a parcel of land there and agreed to sell it to him. Yuan purchased it and built Huanshang Village, less than a mile from the famous Shang dynasty historical site, a few yards from the railway line, and very close to the official highway.³⁴

Yuan had to remain vigilant against further reprisals by Zaifeng. This strong fear drove him to play the recluse. He consistently emphasized his aloofness from politics and indifference to power, viewing his main task as regaining his health. He desired to project the image of a selfless loyalist upholding traditional values and fulfilling his obligations as a retired official. Though still haunted by the trauma of his political fall, he had to show that he enjoyed the delights of solitude. In his own metaphor, the universe was his home and becoming one with nature as an old man was the best way for him to pass his remaining years.³⁵ Indeed, on a few occasions he beseeched Duan Qirui to help him purchase a coffin to prepare for his coming death.³⁶ From a political perspective, the life of a recluse was his best hope to protect himself.

Yuan did not lead a completely natural life; instead, he created a small kingdom. He significantly enlarged his landholdings through new purchases and gradually established an enclosed village with a special residential area for his wife, concubines, and children. He built a vast private garden called “the Longevity Sustaining Garden” (*Yangshouyuan*), a title granted to him by Cixi years before. He named other buildings within this garden after old labels bestowed by the late empress dowager. It is no surprise that Yuan kept the memory of his former patroness fresh in his mind. By adopting those names as remembrances of her, Yuan hoped to display his loyalty to the Qing Empire. Huanshang Village could be viewed as a network of natural, cultural, and environmental projects for his private life. At the same time, it could be prized as a monument to past glories, which suggests why Yuan emphasized his ties with Cixi. Within the village, Yuan built a residence with more than two hundred rooms and more than twenty landmarks. The village’s total area was more than 300 *mu* (46.9 acres) and was surrounded by a high wall. In front of the village, a river flowed past, and using its water, Yuan carved out a lake with pavilions within the walls of the village, which for a time some called the First Village of China. Unfortunately, it would be destroyed in a later civil war.³⁷

An overview of Yuan Shikai's private activities reveals his prudence. He understood that his life had changed dramatically: he had fallen from high-ranking official to ordinary, private man. He wrote 750 letters during the nearly three years following his dismissal, but most of them were replies to incoming correspondence. More shockingly, 625 of them focus on his slow recovery of health.³⁸ Yuan avoided deep engagement with officials and refused to ask favours of them. For example, his brother-in-law Yang Yinian in May 1909 asked him to utilize his ties to obtain an official position for him. Yuan's answer was bluntly resolute: "I shut my door with just one purpose of healing my illness. I am sorry that I cannot offer you any help, as I have not communicated with the officialdom for a long time."³⁹ Notwithstanding his dismissal, many of his former colleagues, subordinates, and friends sent gifts or money to him on special occasions such as his daughter's wedding and his brother's death. Yuan refused to accept the money and kept only a few non-monetary gifts.⁴⁰ He would briefly stash the money away and then return it to the senders.

Yuan now returned to his old pastime of composing poetry. It had been almost thirty years since he burned his youthful poems. Now he resumed his old habit. More than twenty of the poems he composed in Huanshang Village have survived, and from them we can glean his inner emotions, tender feelings, and intrinsic humanity. The poems can be grouped into three categories. First, like all poets, Yuan presented his observations of natural changes, focusing on flowers, the seasons, and nature's beauty. In "Fallen Flowers," he wrote: "The falling flowers dance outside the window, and seem to be flying snow-flakes. I call a young servant to clean the yard, but only find that the wind brings them to unknown places." Perhaps he found solace in watching the seasons change. The second category was his writing that expressed his reclusion, in which he portrayed himself as an old fisherman, a tea drinker, an ardent reader, and a carefree rustic. The third category was couched in classical language coupled with historical anecdotes to vent his complaints, fears, anger, and ambition. In "Climbing the Storied Building," he expressed his ambition: "The small storied building can only hold my knee, although the high eaves are level with the top of the high trees. When I open my window I find the Big Dipper on the horizon, and when I roll over in my bed I find the nearby Taihang Mountain in a lower degree."⁴¹

Some have praised Yuan Shikai as "an extraordinary poet,"⁴² while others might rate him a pedestrian one. It is fair to say that he did not intend to achieve fame as a poet. Yet his poems demonstrate his profound understanding of Chinese classics and poetry and display his high

level of skill as a writer. His poems cannot be called great. That said, he was meticulous in his word choice, composed lines to utter his ideas, chose historical stories to express his emotions, and endeavoured to follow the literary rules, and in those ways, they are much better than mediocre. No wonder, then, that Qing official Zheng Xiong selected Yuan's poems for his anthology titled *Poems by Famous Ministers*. In a letter written in late 1910, Zheng praised Yuan's poems: "they are very sophisticated, contain significant meanings, and could be comparable to those written by famous ministers ever since the Tang and Song dynasties."⁴³ Some of Yuan's poems were published in *Dongfang Zazhi* in mid-1911 and enjoyed a wide readership for a while.⁴⁴

A pressing issue for Yuan was his children's education. In his private life, Yuan begat thirty-two children from one wife and nine concubines (two of whom were childless, however). While living in Huanshang Village, Yuan devoted his time and energy to this issue. He set up a private school, hired teachers, and enforced strict rules. He allowed his young concubines to be educated. The curriculum was comprehensive, with a special combination of Chinese learning, science, and Western learning. Contending that progress has no boundaries (*jinwujiang*), he enjoined his children to embrace new knowledge. He stressed the importance of moral behaviour and decent conduct, telling them that a learned person without an ethical sense was useless. He endeavoured to instil in his family traditional ways of life while equipping them with knowledge of modern science and technology. Of all Yuan's activities for his children's education, perhaps the most telling was his codification of the "Yuan family school rule" (*Yuanshijia shuxunyan*) in late 1910. In that rule, he emphasized the vital importance of discipline and specified a series of penalties for violations. In this way, he injected his military regimen into his family school. He expected his children to be knowledgeable individuals and moral citizens.⁴⁵ Yet Yuan was open-minded as well, as demonstrated when he sent his sons in 1911 to American educators to receive a Western-style education.⁴⁶

Given his huge family, Yuan needed to make money. During his years as a recluse, Yuan engaged in industrial initiatives, both for his own benefit and out of the conviction that "industry is vital for national salvation."⁴⁷ He once told his friends that "official positions are not that important but industry must be managed."⁴⁸ Thus he invested in different projects, such as the Beijing Running Water Company, Luoshan Silver Mining, and Yuxin Textile Mills. Bringing running water to Beijing was a project to which he devoted particular attention. He sent Wang Xitong

as a manager to Beijing for this project, which was completed in 1910. Before then, the residents of Beijing had relied on 1,245 wells for their water. After the project was completed, the residents were able to switch to this new water source.⁴⁹ The company owned water plants and water towers. Its pipes extended for 185 kilometres, and its hoses for 210. The basic structure of Beijing's water supply would remain unchanged for the next thirty years.⁵⁰ With the earnings from that project, Yuan was able to sustain his large family.

Yuan was not a total recluse, and over time he developed a reputation as an advocate for the public good. In the early twentieth century, as discussion arose over public spaces such as urban parks, rural resorts, and scenic mountains, Yuan took the lead in a project to refurbish the renowned Baiquan Garden in northern Henan, which offered both natural beauty and historical relics. Baiquan Garden is in Huixian, where one hundred springs sprout from the foot of Taihang Mountain. It was here that the Seven Sages of Bamboo resided and that other prestigious scholars once worked. Over the past millennium, various steles, temples, shrines, and other structures had been erected there. Yet this historical trove was in dilapidated condition. Yuan proposed to rebuild it and was supported in this by the local elites. Within a short time, more than ten thousand silver taels had been collected; Yuan, who donated 2,300 taels, was one of the largest contributors. After two years of meticulous work, Baiquan Garden was reborn as a scenic wonderland for travellers. In August 1911, an elated Yuan composed a long essay about the site, which was inscribed on a stele in the garden.⁵¹ In this way, Yuan contributed to local social and cultural advancement. It is no wonder that many saw him as a community icon; Wang Xitong commented that in Yuan a "heroic disposition shines around."⁵²

Yuan's concern for the public good was also evident in his promotion of education. The thrust of his idea was to draw attention to educational advancement, to create a healthy climate for educational facilities, and to provide sufficient funding for schools. On July 19, 1911, he wrote a letter to the officials in Zhili asking them to assist the Number One Elementary School of Tianjin.⁵³ The school was owned by the community, and the slack economy that year had negatively impacted local donations, which was its main source of funds. It would be a pity if the school were discontinued, Yuan stated, for it had been running well for nine years. Yuan begged the officials to lend a hand. Finally, the officials agreed to allocate eight hundred silver taels to help the school survive the crisis.⁵⁴ During his years of seclusion and for a long time after, Yuan intended to

establish a university at Baiquan in northern Henan, but was hampered by a lack of funds for the project. This idea would persist in his mind for years. When he became president, he dispatched Yan Xiu to investigate Baiquan for this mission. Unfortunately, Yan Xiu wrote in 1915, the old houses there had already collapsed and the available space had shrunk as a result of recent building projects, so it would be impossible to erect a university. Only then was Yuan's plan finally shattered.⁵⁵

Yuan Shikai might claim to be living like a hermit in harmony with nature, but clearly he was not. On the contrary, his circumstances had not cut him off from social relations, and he did not want to lose his place in public memory. During those years, he wove friendships with local elites, renewed ties with old friends, and coped with the perplexities of the late Qing social network. As soon as he arrived in northern Henan, local elites flocked to his side. Henan governor Qi Yaolin dispatched a company of more than one hundred local soldiers to protect Huanshang Village and guarantee Yuan's safety.⁵⁶ Yuan renewed or broadened his ties with many elites; furthermore, nearly one hundred national elites visited Huanshang Village, including Tang Shaoyi, Duan Qirui, Yan Xiu, Wang Shizhen, and Zhang Jian. Through prudent communication, he mended his tense relations with Sheng Xuanhuai. At the same time, he mediated inharmonious relationships among his former subordinates.⁵⁷ His renewed social network would smooth the way for his political resurrection, because he would be able to obtain support from those elites or at least preclude their opposition. Indeed, those elites would support his re-emergence after the 1911 Revolution broke out, viewing him as the only military and political leader who could handle that grave emergency and save the country.

CONCLUSION

Yuan Shikai's dismissal from the Qing government in early 1909 shocked the world and sparked ongoing speculation over the causes of that event. In the twentieth century, a variety of theories were offered, each containing some kernel of truth. The most plausible theory is that for the sake of revenge, Zaifeng after Cixi's death moved recklessly against him. Needless to say, the dismissal was a disaster for Yuan, who was not fully prepared for a sudden imperial decree sacking him. His political career had vanished in an instant, and his life was suddenly in danger. At that point he fled to Tianjin. Only after hearing that his personal safety was ensured did he

return to the capital. Soon after, he returned to his native province, claiming to have gone into seclusion. For the desperate Yuan, that was his best hope for protecting himself.

For nearly a century, the common view was that Yuan began plotting his political return as soon as he was dismissed. In 1914, Huang Xing, a revolutionary leader, remarked that “once Yuan returned to his native Henan, many people assumed that he from then on would enjoy nature between the mountains and the rivers and would spend the rest of his life as such. What they did not know was that Yuan’s ambition never abated even for a single day.”⁵⁸ This assumption, cast as a denunciation, became the accepted view and was lent further credence by the political climate of the day. It was widely accepted that Yuan had been always power-hungry and willing to seize every chance to re-emerge as a national force. Sadly, this view persisted throughout twentieth-century historical literature.

The fact that Yuan had fallen to the very bottom of Qing officialdom suffices to indicate Huang Xing’s hyperbolic imprecision. Huang’s overheated rhetoric was coloured by his and Sun Yat-sen’s failure during the Second Revolution. Portraying Yuan as an ambitious politician and as the usurper of the revolution might inspire the Chinese to join a new struggle against him. It would be a distortion of history to say that Yuan was thinking about rising to power again from the very moment of his dismissal. Yet that is the view that took hold, and from there, rumours soon abounded. Some even claimed that Yuan had established a telegraph office (*dianbaofang*) at Huanshang Village in order to obtain useful information and prepare for his return. The myth of the telegraph office in his home is now regarded by scholars as baseless hearsay.⁵⁹

The truth is that Yuan from the very moment of his dismissal acted with caution, for he had suddenly become a powerless political outcast. He was an asylum seeker and a political refugee, intent on protecting his life and his extended family. That’s why he quickly left the political whirlpool in the capital and declared himself a recluse. He knew that any wrong moves by him would incur further tragedy, and he had to show the Imperial Court that he harboured no ambitions. Moreover, he was being closely monitored by Zaifeng, who had ordered Yuan Deliang to escort Yuan Shikai as a “minder.” Yuan Deliang, who was not a relative of Yuan Shikai, had just one task: to report on Yuan Shikai’s routine activities. So it was impossible for Yuan to exhibit any sign of disloyalty. Of course, Yuan Shikai was a shrewd politician who soon won over Yuan Deliang through bribes and favourable treatment. Consequently, Yuan Deliang’s reports to Zaifeng were generally advantageous to Yuan Shikai.⁶⁰

After Yuan Shikai was dismissed and others passed away or were pushed aside, the Qing Empire was impaired by incompetent leadership. In a way, Yuan came to serve as a shining example of Zaifeng's abuse of imperial power and his persecution of talented Han officials. As time passed, there were widely conducted discussions about Yuan's re-emergence. For example, *Dagongbao* and *Shengjingshibao*, two influential newspapers, published 106 news reports about Yuan Shikai and his life at Huanshang Village, and sixty-four of these called for his reinstatement.⁶¹ Many of Yuan's friends hoped to see him become an official again, and one of them beseeched him in a letter that "your advance and your retreat actually impact the nation's safety and security." Another friend implored him that "all people within the land expect you to re-emerge as an imperial statesman."⁶² Ultimately, soon after the revolution broke out on October 10, 1911, Yuan indeed re-emerged as a powerful imperial official. More importantly, he would play a significant role in the transformation of China from empire to republic.

9

The 1911 Revolution

While Yuan Shikai was in “retirement” in Zhangde, a whirlwind of events launched a nationwide revolution. During his three years away from politics, the elites – known as the Constitutionalists – had called for constitutional reforms and pushed for the nationalizing of the railway system. More devastating to the Qing Empire was Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary activities against the Manchu dynasty. All the while, the Imperial Court mismanaged national affairs, falling into a panic when none of its strategies worked. In response to the Constitutionalists’ demands, Zaifeng organized a cabinet in 1911, but it turned out to be a Royal Cabinet (*Huangzuneige*) calculated to reinforce Qing rule; the thirteen cabinet members included nine Manchus, five of whom were from the imperial household. By this point, Zaifeng had lost all moral authority. The public had lost trust in him after he sent troops to suppress demonstrations against railway nationalization. The growing volatility in the country made it clear that Zaifeng was providing disastrous leadership to the shaky empire. All of this seemed to have nothing to do with the “recluse” Yuan Shikai. Nevertheless, the 1911 Revolution drew this solitary man back into the national orbit.

Between October 10, 1911, when the revolution broke out in Wuchang, and February 12, 1912, when the Qing abdication occurred, Yuan Shikai rose from recluse to prominent national leader. Less than a month after the imperial abdication, he became provisional president of the Republic of China. Yet Yuan was a counter-revolutionary from the very beginning. That he was able to become president in the first place was the result

of a combination of factors. Later historiographical claims that Yuan usurped the revolution sound logical, because the revolutionaries had made greater sacrifices to overthrow the Qing whereas Yuan, an official of the old regime, simply seized the opportunity to become president. Accordingly, this view asserts that Yuan used the Imperial Court to press the revolutionaries to accept his conditions, then used the revolutionaries to force the Qing to abdicate, thus harvesting the fruit of the revolution through trickery. This perspective persisted throughout the twentieth century under the Nationalist regime and then under Communist rule, in what Winston Hsieh has creatively termed the “orthodox” and “neo-orthodox” historiographies.¹ The Nationalists condemned Yuan as a thief who stole the revolution; the Communists described him as having trained his arrow at both the revolutionaries and the Imperial Court.

But just because all of this sounds logical does not make it true. Over the past three decades, scholars have examined new primary sources and arrived at a new analysis. The post-Mao liberal academic milieu in China has allowed a new and thorough interpretation that has winnowed out politicized, simplistic, and distorted misconceptions. The farther from the event, the clearer the historical reality. Departing from the dogmatic view, scholars now offer insightful perspectives that emphasize Yuan’s pivotal role in the 1911 Revolution. They argue that the issue is not whether Yuan was a revolutionary but whether he had supported the revolutionary objective. If he assisted the revolution, his positive role should be affirmed. Of course, Yuan was a shrewd politician. On one hand he acted for the benefit of his Beiyang Clique, and on the other he strived to benefit from the revolution. However, he manoeuvred according to the needs of the time and performed progressive deeds, which was not expected from a Qing official like himself.

YUAN’S RE-EMERGENCE

At the outset of the revolution, Yuan Shikai was a pure counter-revolutionary. In fact, he did not get the news of the Wuchang Uprising until October 12, 1911, while Yuan’s family was celebrating his birthday. Needless to say, the outbreak arrived as a thunderbolt. Yuan resolutely stated that neither he nor his descendants would be revolutionaries² and was predisposed to suppress the revolution. He had suffered political persecution by Zaifeng, yet he still felt obliged to defend the Qing Empire because of his family ties and his personal service to it over the past decades.

Four days after the Wuchang Uprising, the Imperial Court dispatched Ruan Zhongshu, Yuan's former subordinate, to Huanshang Village to deliver an imperial edict appointing Yuan governor general of Huguang with the particular assignment of suppressing the revolution with provincial military forces. Yuan was elated at the summons but quickly grasped how difficult it would be to carry out his task. At this critical moment, he stood on the Qing side, expressing to the Imperial Court that he would work with utmost devotion (*jugongjincui*) to carry out his duties.³ Even so, his personal grudge against Zaifeng persisted. More fatally, Zaifeng's edict only allowed Yuan to command local troops, which by then had joined the revolution. Faced with this daunting task, Yuan asked for more time to recover his health. He said that "as the autumn arrives, the weather turns cold. I suffer from coughs, fever, dizziness, and irregular heartbeat. It is hard for me to concentrate ... I will quickly take medicine and prepare to set off for the job."⁴ Yuan's tardiness was viewed as a remonstrance. Indeed, between the imperial call on October 14 and his departure on October 30, he took more than two weeks to cure his "illness."

The question inevitably arises: Why did the Imperial Court appoint Yuan to address such a grave crisis? As soon as the revolution started in Wuchang, the Imperial Court dispatched the Beiyang troops southward with the Manchu noble Yinchang as commander. Yinchang was a timid man who dared not show himself at the front lines. The troops trained by Yuan demanded that Yuan be reinstated to handle the situation.⁵ Thus the Imperial Court had no choice but to appoint him. Furthermore, Constitutionalists such as Zhang Jian were pushing for Yuan's reinstatement. So were the foreign diplomats in Beijing, who advised the Imperial Court to assign Yuan. Yuan's supporters of many political stripes were all of one mind in calling him back from his "retirement." Their support was couched enthusiastically, as they proclaimed that Yuan was the only man who could solve the crisis.

Yuan now made a number of requests to the Imperial Court in order that he could properly carry out his duties. The most widely circulated assertion in the twentieth century was that Yuan resented the relatively low-ranking position of governor general and feigned illness as a part of his efforts to haggle with Zaifeng for a higher position. According to many writers, Yuan proposed "Six Political Requests": inauguration of a national assembly the following year, organization of a responsible cabinet, amnesty granted to the revolutionaries, removal of the ban on political parties, his own full control of all military forces, and assurances of sufficient military funding.⁶ The first four were Yuan's offers to the

revolutionaries, and the last two were to ensure that he would be able to control the Imperial Court.⁷ According to this view, then, Yuan from the start had it in mind to seize power.

Yet according to Liu Lusheng's research, these "Six Political Requests" were purely fictional. They are not mentioned in any primary documents, nor is their existence mentioned in any writings by Yuan or any other official. The earliest mention of them is found in Li Jianming's monograph on modern Chinese history, published in 1930. When Li wrote his book, the archives were not open. Li used contemporary newspapers as his sources, and among these, some articles occasionally did mention some of the "requests." From this, Li Jianming concocted the so-called Six Political Requests. According to Liu Lusheng, those six were pure fabrications.⁸ Nevertheless, they were looked upon as authentic, for they could be used to reveal Yuan's sinister intent. That is why they were widely circulated and have even penetrated Western historical literature.⁹

Did Yuan Shikai ever make requests to the Imperial Court? Yes, he did. But they were not the six requests listed above; rather, they were what Liu Lusheng calls the "Eight Military Requests," and no political strings were attached to them. The eight are scattered throughout various primary documents, which generally reveal Yuan's strategies for defeating the revolutionaries. While he was planning his military action, Yuan complained that "if I go to Hubei now, I do not even have any land to rest my feet on and I do not have any troops under my command."¹⁰ "The army in Hubei have all switched to the rebels' side and the treasury there has been lost. Now, with my empty hands and bare fists, how could I exterminate the rebels?"¹¹ Clearly, then, Yuan was making his requests in various appropriate documents, and they related to recruiting soldiers, raising military funds, releasing him from others' control, appointing Wang Shizhen to handle military affairs, selecting Feng Guozhang as military coordinator, dispatching military commanders for coordination, pardoning revolutionaries, and collecting urgent aid for famine relief.¹² The eight military requests reflected Yuan's efforts to suppress the revolution. Having acceded to his demands, the Imperial Court urged him to act swiftly.

It is instructive to note the diverse responses among Yuan's men to his imperial appointment. When the edict arrived at Huanshang Village, two different camps formed among Yuan's family members, friends, and former subordinates. His son Yuan Keding and his business partner Wang Xitong strongly opposed the edict. Wang reasoned that the national situation could not be salvaged, even if Yuan suppressed the uprising in Hubei. Wang warned Yuan that "once the uprising is suppressed, your own life

might be further endangered.”¹³ However, Yuan’s former subordinates Ruan Zhongshu, Zhao Bingjun, and Zhang Xiluan fervently supported it. Some of his subordinates, such as Ni Sichong and Zhang Yilin, even suggested that Yuan seize the opportunity to proclaim himself emperor and found a new dynasty.¹⁴ However much arguing there was among his supporters, Yuan had already made his decision: he was determined to save the Qing. His decision sprang from his long-held loyalty to China’s imperial institutions. This may shed light on why he consistently refused to endorse the revolution and why he tried to salvage the regime, which was on the brink of collapse. Whatever his intentions, he was cautious, and he assured Wang Xitong that he would treat the revolutionaries in a civilized manner.¹⁵

Yuan’s re-emergence on the national scene was an important event in late Qing history and was sensational news at the time. It sparked people’s imaginations as they assessed the revolution’s likely outcome. The renowned educator Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940) envisioned four possible scenarios after Yuan’s appointment: that after Yuan arrived in Hubei he would join the revolution and launch a northern expedition to overthrow the Qing; that Yuan would be murdered by his soldiers, who would join the revolution; that Yuan would defeat the revolution but then march north to proclaim his emperorship; and that Yuan would behave like Zeng Guofan and ruthlessly suppress the revolution.¹⁶ Cai’s prediction underscores how uncertain the national situation was in late 1911; no one knew what would happen next. But his prophecies at least pointed to two probabilities: that the downfall of the Qing was quickly approaching, and that Yuan should not be underestimated. Perhaps, at that critical moment – and many thought so – only Yuan was in a position to turn the nation in a new direction.

The responses of prominent foreigners to Yuan’s re-emergence deserve attention. There was no joint action among the powers, but Britain and the United States enthusiastically endorsed Yuan’s return, which was immediately covered by the Western media. G.E. Morrison viewed Yuan Shikai as the only hope for the imperial household and as the only person who could restore order at a time of so much national chaos. British foreign secretary Edward Grey favoured Yuan, believing that he could maintain a relatively strong and functional government.¹⁷ One Western newspaper enthusiastically endorsed Yuan on November 4, 1911: “He is the kind of strong, able, and fearless leader that China needs at this critical time.”¹⁸ In the *New York Times*, Richard Barry praised Yuan to the skies: “A man of such nerve, such cunning, and such diplomacy was

needed, at that time in China and in Peking [Beijing] ... Today, apparently, the same man has again been found.”¹⁹ Yuan had handled the Boxer Uprising with consummate skill, and now he was expected to solve the current crisis successfully.

On leaving Huanshang Village, Yuan acted swiftly, belying past assumptions that he delayed doing so. He told the Imperial Court that his “lifelong wish is to fight on the battlefield for the dynasty” and that he was eager to “exterminate bandits.”²⁰ Yuan accelerated the efforts to suppress the rebels. After a new round of deploying troops, he aimed at a swift military takeover of the tri-city of Wuhan (Wuchang, Hanyang, and Hankou), at the time occupied by the revolutionaries. At the very least, he contemplated breaking through the enemy’s front lines in Hankou. He knew the importance of his soldiers’ morale, and he tried to showcase his care for them. According his sedan driver Feng Peide,

Yuan Shikai departed from Anyang on October 30, 1911, and arrived in Zhengzhou the same day. He arrived in Xinyang on the second day and Xiaogan on the third day. On the fourth day, he reached his destination on the frontlines. Yuan Shikai first went to the hospital to comfort wounded soldiers, distributed silver dollars to them, ordered doctors to provide good care, and requested that staff offer nutritional meals. His concubine presented the wounded soldiers with fruit, candies, and other gifts, while expressing her utmost concern. Yuan’s thoughtful gesture deeply moved his soldiers.²¹

Yuan proceeded with caution when engaging militarily. He knew that Wuhan could not be fully besieged by his troops. What deeply disturbed him was the weak defence in the rear, where there had been only thin military preparations along the railway line on which he had just travelled.²² By now, more provinces were declaring independence from the Qing, and Yuan realized that the situation had become more precarious than he first thought. He was troubled by the foreigners’ neutrality, and he took action to improve ties with them so as not to provoke foreign intervention. Even more distressing, the revolutionaries had penetrated the imperial lines in the Beijing-Tianjin area, and their plans for an uprising worried him. Probably in an effort to tighten the government’s grip on the northern lands and to stabilize the capital area, Yuan took pre-emptive action to eliminate possible threats. The assassination of a division commander, Wu Luzhen, a revolutionary, on November 7, 1911, was one example of this.

The transition from retired official to military commander and provincial governor was not an easy one for Yuan. Most of his soldiers from the north had witnessed the government's disintegration in central China. As the revolution spread outward and Qing officials fled from Hubei, the local administration became paralyzed. Yuan could not obtain much local cooperation and could not even collect useful information. In one report to the Imperial Court, Yuan complained that no one except Lian-jia, the provincial judicial officer, reported to him or respected him as the governor general.²³ But Yuan was not yet in deep water, for his soldiers were unwavering in their loyalty to him. British journalist Edwin J. Dingle, who visited Yuan's soldiers during those days, offered the following words: "The photo of Yuan Shih K'ai [Shikai] was in every barrack-room, his name upon every lip. Again as I moved about among the men was I impressed with the hero-worshipping of man towards leader."²⁴

Yuan and his army unleashed merciless attacks on Hankou, one trisect of Wuhan, on the northern bank of the Yangtze River. The revolutionaries bravely resisted. It is said that he ordered the use of fire as a weapon. As a result, the wealthy urban area of Hankou, with its mostly wooden houses, was razed, resulting in huge property losses as well as horrendous civilian casualties. Witnesses would recount that Yuan's soldiers indiscriminately abused the locals, murdering them and pillaging their property, which forced Yuan to discipline them. But these problems aside, much to Yuan's satisfaction, his army occupied Hankou on November 3, 1911. According to his report to the Imperial Court, his army suffered only seventy casualties compared to the enemy's six hundred. The victory boosted Yuan's reputation enormously and seemed to prove his ability to beat the revolutionaries. In the aftermath, on November 8, 1911, he was elected premier of the cabinet by the Assembly of Political Consultation (*Zizhengyuan*) in Beijing. To assume this position, he travelled north by train, arriving in Beijing on November 13. Three days later, he was sworn in as premier of the Qing Empire.²⁵ Yuan had soared from retired official to premier within only a couple of weeks. Zaifeng was soon forced to "retire," at which point Yuan became China's most powerful political and military leader.

THE NORTH-SOUTH NEGOTIATIONS

The long-held view of Yuan Shikai goes as follows: he deliberately halted military attacks on the revolutionaries so that he could use them to deal with the Imperial Court. Simultaneously, he used the Imperial Court to

press the revolutionaries for his own political ends. In other words, he was not loyal to the Qing dynasty, but neither could he be trusted by the revolutionaries. He took advantage of a critical situation to snatch victory away from the revolution. However, a careful reading of the primary sources reveals a different story; this one goes that Yuan was compelled to negotiate with the revolutionaries in order to maintain social order, reach a peace agreement, and avoid further bloodshed.

First of all, the high cost of Yuan's attacks on Hanyang had forced him to halt his offensive. Yuan had ordered the Qing forces to launch assaults on Hanyang, another trisect of Wuhan, in late November 1911. Although he used modern bridging equipment on loan from the Germans in Qingdao, the battle to cross the Han River to reach Hanyang was difficult. Modern urban warfare has always proven costly. Yuan's forces fought for nearly a week, during which his soldiers tried to seize strategic positions as they landed on the opposite bank. Yuan's forces finally occupied Hanyang on November 27, but only after heavy losses. According to one source, one regiment suffered 507 casualties, and another unit had only 1,093 soldiers left after the battle. In other words, Yuan had lost more than two thousand men.²⁶ Of course, the revolutionaries suffered even greater casualties. Francis Stafford, who was present at the battles for Hankou and Hanyang, reported that "more than 5,000 insurgents died during the two months of combat in the Wuhan area; only 32 were identified by name. Thousands more were wounded."²⁷ The courageous resistance of the revolutionaries compelled Yuan to suspend his attacks.

The overall national situation compelled Yuan to seek negotiations rather than continue his costly attacks. Soon after the Wuchang Uprising, fourteen provinces and the city of Shanghai declared independence from the Qing and established respective local military governments. The ethnic tensions between Han and Manchu inspired by open anti-Manchu sentiment had transformed a relatively peaceful empire into a dangerously unstable one. Manchus were being killed indiscriminately in a number of places, including Xi'an, Wuchang, Taiyuan, Zhenjiang, and other cities, as Edward Rhoads has noted in his study.²⁸ Flare-ups of violence were impeding travel and impeding normal commercial activities, and refugees were fleeing urban areas. While it was Manchus who were being targeted, Han Chinese, who feared Manchu retaliation, also lived in fear. As the revolution took hold, the normal social order could no longer be maintained. In addition, 150 local peasant uprisings occurred in the year following the Wuchang Uprising.²⁹

Yuan took careful note of the unpredictable international situation. In particular, he was deeply upset by the foreign powers' stance of neutrality; they were apparently indifferent to the Imperial Court. As the revolution broke out, foreign naval vessels journeyed up the Yangtze River in the name of protecting their nationals. Within ten days, sixteen foreign naval ships had appeared near Wuhan; by November there were fifty-one. The presence of so many foreign vessels of war was not a good omen. Besides this, more powers were sending troops to the Beijing-Tianjin area; within a few months there were 13,000 foreign troops there.³⁰ As the fighting raged on, foreigners were increasingly impacted. One foreigner demanded that the powers dispatch more troops to protect their citizens.³¹ Yuan knew that their temporary neutrality threatened to turn into active intervention, bringing even more disaster to China.

The shaky economic situation – the imperial treasury was almost empty – meant that Yuan would be unable to continue the war. It was the Imperial Court that provided weapons, equipment, and logistical supplies, offered medical care for the wounded, and compensated the families of fallen troops. A protracted war would be costly. Yuan asked the Manchu nobles to donate, and Yikuang responded by contributing one hundred thousand silver taels; others, too, offered various sums. But these contributions were only a drop in the bucket to fund such a major military operation. At one point Yuan even petitioned the Imperial Court to auction off the porcelains in the Imperial Palace to raise more money for military funding.³² Gradually, Yuan realized that it would be far less expensive to negotiate for peace rather than continue a long-running war. According to Zhang Guogan, who worked with him, financial difficulties compelled Yuan to tone down his harsh rhetoric against the revolutionaries. Yuan's vocabulary changed "from 'extermination' to 'pacification' and then to 'negotiation.'" Finally, he intended to promote a peaceful settlement between the South and the North."³³

Yuan possessed a Han nationalist mindset, for he *was* Han Chinese, although not an anti-Manchu revolutionary. His business partner Wang Xitong advised him not to use the military to suppress the rising Han revolutionary movement, and his son Yuan Keding strongly advocated the restoration of Han Chinese rule.³⁴ Anti-Manchu Han nationalism had penetrated Chinese minds so deeply that two private tutors working with Yuan Shikai's children requested permission to leave in order to join the anti-Manchu struggle.³⁵ If the war continued, more Han would die. At one point Yuan exclaimed that "the soldiers are Han and those who suffered or died are Han too. In whatever way and in whichever result, my

fellow Han will agonize over the pain and bear the affliction.”³⁶ Perhaps empathy for his fellow Han Chinese encouraged him to adopt a new attitude towards a non-military settlement.

Sun Yat-sen was an ardent revolutionary, yet he too, as well as his fellow revolutionaries, encountered numerous difficulties that finally compelled them to seek peace. The first and foremost problem was the military one. Because of the huge reservoir of manpower in the south, the revolutionaries were not short of soldiers. It is said that around 100,000 men joined the revolutionary army, not to mention provincial forces (which a young Mao Zedong joined to support the revolution). But the lack of military training made those new recruits unfit for combat. Their commanders were equally unskilled, which is why the revolutionary soldiers in Wuhan forced Li Yuanhong – who was not a revolutionary at first – to be their leader. Huang Xing was a brave revolutionary, but he had little military expertise. He was mocked as the “long-legged general” who fled after his defeats.³⁷ And we must remember that the revolutionaries were constantly short of arms, equipment, and other supplies.

The revolutionaries were in dire economic straits. Their efforts to borrow money from foreign powers came to nothing. The customs authorities quashed their hopes of collecting tariffs. The revolution required a huge budget and could not be supported by unstable revenue sources. It is said that Sun Yat-sen even considered leasing Manchuria to Japan to collect the rents.³⁸ The sale of public debt did not raise a large sum, either.³⁹ When Sun established his provisional government in early 1912, its plight was exacerbated when four months of income amounted to only \$7 million, while military expenditures alone required a monthly amount of \$5 million (or \$20 million for four months).⁴⁰ According to Li Shucheng’s personal testimony, the soldiers suffered from this poor funding. “The food for the revolutionary army had to be changed from rice to thin porridge and then even porridge could not be provided.”⁴¹ As a result, munitions rose. The economic difficulties alone were enough to drive the revolutionaries to seek peace.

Facing financial strain and other problems, the revolutionaries began to adopt a new approach, one that is mocked today as “revolution on the cheap.” It revolved around persuading Yuan Shikai to force the Imperial Court to abdicate; Yuan would then be offered the position of president of the republic. Correspondingly, the tone of Sun Yat-sen’s propaganda changed: he began to justify his peace negotiations by claiming that he did not want to see a bloody civil war that would do the nation horrendous damage. In late December 1911, Sun remarked that “it is true that

Yuan Shikai is not trustworthy. Yet, we can use him to overthrow the two hundred-sixty year Manchu tyrannical rule. It would be better to do this than to launch a war by sacrificing over one hundred thousand troops to achieve the same goal.”⁴² Huang Xing once stated that “Yuan Shikai is a talented individual and he is skillful in political management. His administrative expertise is far above ours. It is an auspicious fortune for China, if Yuan can be dedicated to the new state.”⁴³

The north-south negotiations began in November 1911 and dragged on until the Qing abdication in February 1912. For the first two months, the negotiations were conducted through representatives of the two sides. Even before then, Yuan had sent peace feelers to Wuchang for the purpose of persuading Li Yuanhong to settle for peace within a framework of constitutional monarchy. Li's resolute refusal of a constitutional monarchy ended Yuan's attempt to preserve the Qing imperial institution. On November 18, 1911, Yuan dispatched his representative Tang Shaoyi to hold five talks with the south's representative, Wu Tingfang. They continued to the end of the year. The first session was held in the British Municipal Hall in Shanghai. Besides the two representatives and their staffs, foreign consuls from the United States, Britain, Russia, Japan, Germany, and France attended. The two sides endorsed the halting of military actions. From the second session on, the two sides discussed the future national political system; on this point no unanimous agreement would be reached for a long time.

The primary sources verify that Yuan insisted on a constitutional monarchy. While he disliked Zaifeng's regency, his vision was of a genuine and responsible cabinet. He believed that China would descend into turmoil if the Qing government collapsed. If the chaos continued, China would be invaded and carved up by the foreign powers.⁴⁴ Yuan called for limits on the monarch's authority and for power to reside in a parliament. He distrusted republicanism, fearing it would lead to anarchy if vainglorious, self-proclaimed republican politicians fought with one another. He predicted that a republic would be followed by turmoil, and he feared this could lead to a decades-long civil war. He felt that the republic should be established not suddenly but only after a long process of constitutional reform.⁴⁵ On a personal level, Yuan intended to help the Qing survive. On December 22, 1911, he told Japanese minister Ijuin Hikokichi that “I absolutely defend constitutional monarchy ... and I have no intention of endorsing the republican system.”⁴⁶

By sharp contrast, the revolutionaries were unyielding in their support for republicanism.⁴⁷ It is said that at this critical moment, Wang Jingwei

(1883–1944), a follower of Sun Yat-sen, played a key role in changing Yuan's mind. Wang, a Cantonese, had journeyed to Beijing before the revolution on a mission to assassinate the prince regent. When his plot failed, he was jailed; when the revolution broke out, he was released. Wang and Yuan's eldest son now became friends. Through this relationship, Wang visited Yuan many times in Beijing. During their conversations, Wang emphasized the benefits of the republican system. Yuan repudiated the republic at first but gradually abandoned his support for the monarchy. By the end of this process, Yuan was arguing merely that it would be difficult to found a republic suddenly.⁴⁸ Faced with Sun's non-compromising attitude, Yuan gradually leaned towards republicanism, until by early 1912, according to Ma Yong, Yuan had "completed his transformation from an advocate of constitutional monarchy to a limited republican."⁴⁹

As premier of the Qing Empire, Yuan had conducted the bilateral negotiations through directives to Tang Shaoyi, who represented him at the table. While his stance on constitutional monarchy remained unchanged, Yuan had begun to soften his position on the future political system. He instructed Tang to strike a deal with the south whereby the future political system, be it a constitutional monarchy or a republic, would be determined by the newly elected National Assembly. Of course, a lengthy debate over how to organize such an assembly was a topic of the bilateral negotiations. By early 1912, Yuan had become more flexible regarding China's political future and no longer excluded republicanism as an option. He continued to worry about too sudden change, however, telling Tang that "the change of the millennia-long monarchy along with other related matters must be determined by the majority of the National Assembly. Otherwise, any changes would not win the hearts of our compatriots."⁵⁰ Clearly, Yuan wanted to hold a national plebiscite to resolve this political dispute.

It would be wrong to assume that Yuan trusted the revolutionaries with whom he was negotiating. At first, he even resorted to psychological warfare to pressure the revolutionaries, ordering the occasional lobbing of a shell or firing of a cannon on Wuchang, the last trisect of Wuhan, in order to remind the south that the current negotiations were not an "absolutely non-combatant situation."⁵¹ As the truce was signed, Yuan advised his provincial governors not to be provocative in their actions.⁵² He also ordered the northern troops to avoid fighting the revolutionary troops.⁵³ At the same time, he was vigilant with regard to any moves by the other side. Occasionally he lodged protests, accusing the south

of violating the truce.⁵⁴ Of course, the south blamed Yuan's troops for breaching the agreement. Overall, there is no evidence that any of the localized conflicts were started under Yuan's orders. Thus the negotiations helped abate the intense military confrontation, to the benefit of both sides as well as the people.

But around New Year's Day, the situation changed dramatically. Tang Shaoyi and Wu Tingfang reached an accord on December 30, 1911, on how to organize the National Assembly, but Yuan bluntly rejected it, viewing it as potentially costly to the north. On January 2, 1912, Yuan approved Tang's resignation. After that, Yuan handled the bilateral negotiations himself. One factor in the changing balance was Sun Yat-sen's move to establish a provisional republican government on January 1, 1912, in Nanjing. Sun made it clear that he would surrender the presidency to Yuan as soon as the negotiators agreed to establish a unified republic. Sun's move rattled Yuan, for Sun had acted unilaterally without notifying the north. In a telegram to Sun on January 2, 1912, Yuan chided Sun that "the issue of monarchy or republic should be decided by the whole nation. Of course, nobody could predict the result of this national decision at this very moment. Yet, the establishment of your provisional government is what I dare not think about."⁵⁵ Yuan suddenly faced the possibility of two governments, which could lead to permanent national division. Thereafter, he took direct charge of the negotiations, but the main topic had now shifted to national unification and imperial abdication.

THE QING ABDICATION

The first two months of 1912 found Yuan in an imbroglio. As premier of the Qing Empire, he was required to handle administrative routines and address unexpected difficulties. The toughest of the latter was the existence of two competing governments: one in Beijing, the other in Nanjing. Yuan had taken the north-south negotiations into his own hands, which was a thorny task, for the two sides had conflicting plans and interests as well as dissimilar objectives. In his efforts to achieve peace, Yuan exchanged correspondence, telegrams, and documents with Wu Tingfang. A reading of these primary sources indicates that Yuan continued to support a resolution of the issue of a national political system through a National Assembly; a plan to protect the imperial household was a key plank in his platform. To avoid public misunderstanding, Yuan ordered that all of the telegrams between himself and Wu be published immediately in the newspapers.⁵⁶

He repeatedly told Wu Tingfang that “before the decision of the National Assembly, nobody should establish the republican government.”⁵⁷ To avoid national division, Yuan reminded Wu that “China is one country. Whatever the future political solution, either monarchy or democracy, the two sides should absolutely obey the assembly. China will continue to be one country and will never be viewed as two divisive states.”⁵⁸

The south’s insistence on republicanism forced Yuan into a difficult position. In early January, Sun Yat-sen even planned a six-pronged northern expedition for the purpose of overthrowing the Qing. As a result, the first two months of 1912 saw violent clashes between north and south, with both sides accusing each other of breaching the truce. On February 6, 1912, Yuan dispatched a telegram to the Northern Expedition Army instructing it “to respect humanity, have a genuinely peaceful heart, and most of all care about the country as one entity.”⁵⁹ The long bilateral negotiations had yet to yield satisfactory results. However, the unbending southern stance was bound to put pressure on the north, and Yuan could not ignore Sun’s tenacious demands.

The north was in an equally complicated situation that Yuan was finding difficult to handle. There were occasional revolutionary uprisings in the north, and these were ruthlessly crushed, with the revolutionaries executed or jailed. Pro-republican activities had gone underground; anti-republican forces remained visible. The overarching goal of the imperial family and Manchu elites in Beijing was to safeguard the empire. In their minds, a republican system was out of the question, and they organized the “Imperial Clan Party” (*Zongshedang*) to defend the dynasty; that faction became an internal enemy for Yuan, for it suspected that Yuan was cutting a secret deal with the south. The imperial guards, numbering ten thousand, were still stationed in Beijing and loathed the south for ruining the empire.⁶⁰ Besides the Manchus, a number of local officials and elites openly opposed republicanism. Zhao Erxun, the governor general of the Northeast Three Provinces (*Dongsansheng*), told Yuan that “the people’s mentality in the Northeast is different ... because they have boundless and intimate respect toward emperor and would like to serve as imperial guards at any time.”⁶¹

In this difficult situation, Yuan had to manoeuvre among various power claimants and respond in multiple ways. The lack of room to manoeuvre among the conflicting interest groups was an excruciating headache for him. Neither peace nor war could solve the national crisis. Yuan told the Imperial Court that “for negotiation, we are short of words; and for war, we lack military funding as well as serviceable weapons.”⁶²

The ongoing upheavals and lengthy conflicts between the north and the south baffled Yuan. Noting that the Qing were losing territory around Beijing, he scaled up his involvement in the negotiations. The situation was continuing to deteriorate, for the south had no intention of making concessions. Needless to say, Yuan wanted to resign, and he presented his resignation to the Imperial Court in mid-January of 1912, hoping that it would “replace me with a talent to save the country in the dangerous situation.”⁶³ The resignation was rejected. By early 1912, Yuan was suffering from anxiety, insomnia, an irregular heartbeat, dizziness, pains, and fever. A few times, he asked for a temporary leave of two or three days. But the Imperial Court viewed Yuan as their last hope. Instead of allowing him to resign, Empress Dowager Longyu bestowed on him the noble rank of marquis. Had this honour been offered a few years earlier, Yuan would have been delighted to accept, but now he resolutely declined. After Longyu repeatedly insisted, Yuan agreed to accept it once the situation improved.⁶⁴

Under heavy pressure from the south, as Yuan began to lean towards republicanism, he discussed the issue of abdication with the Imperial Court. He understood there was a moral imperative, and he did not want to be seen as the man who bullied the widow (Longyu) and the child emperor (six-year-old Puyi). The regime by then was under imminent threat, and he felt that the imperial household would be in danger if the revolutionaries took radical action. Given that risk, on January 16, 1912, he held a private conversation with Longyu about abdication. This private meeting was vividly recorded by Puyi in his memoir:

One day, in one of the rooms of Mind Nurturing Palace, the Empress Dowager Longyu was sitting ... near the southern window and using a handkerchief to wipe the tears from her eyes. In front of her, kneeling on a red carpet, was a stout old man with tears streaming down his face. I sat to the right of the Empress Dowager feeling bewildered because I did not understand why these two adults were crying. There was no one else in the palace besides the three of us and it was very quiet. The fat man was sniffing so loudly when he talked that I could not understand him. Later on I found out that it was Yuan Shikai. This was the only time I ever met him and it was the last time he paid his respects to the Empress Dowager. If what I have been told is correct, this was the occasion when Yuan directly raised the question of my abdication with Longyu. After this audience, Yuan used the pretext of an attempt that had been made on his life at one of the palace gates not to come to court again.⁶⁵

Immediately after this meeting, a group of revolutionaries attempted to assassinate Yuan as he left the imperial palace. According to the most recent studies, this occurred around noon on January 16, 1912. Twenty-three revolutionaries participated in this well-planned attempt. They tried to corner Yuan from the nearby shops near Wangfujing on the eastern side of the Imperial Palace. As Yuan's carriage cart drew near, the assassins threw bombs, killing Yuan's chief guard, wounding several other guards, and injuring some of the horses. The quick-thinking groom sped up the cart, which arrived safely back at Yuan's home. Two female assassins fired pistols at the cart but failed to hit Yuan. Thus he had survived.⁶⁶ Through interrogation, the Qing government quickly uncovered the truth and executed several assassins. This event, on its surface a calamity, turned out to be fortunate for Yuan. Until then, the Manchus had suspected him of being a wicked collaborator with the revolutionaries. Afterwards, Yuan was seen as a man in the same boat as them, in that he was likewise hated by the revolutionaries. It is worth adding that Yuan never returned to the Imperial Palace; instead, he would send representatives to discuss the abdication issue with the Imperial Court.

Diana Lary has argued that one possible reason the Qing dynasty collapsed is that the Manchus lost their will to rule. This is valid in terms of the situation at the time of abdication.⁶⁷ One month earlier, the Manchus had refused to relinquish the throne, and young Manchu members of the royalty had organized the Imperial Clan Party, whose leader, Liangbi (1877–1912), vehemently resisted republicanism and proposed organizing an army to fight to the end. At the imperial household conference on January 17 and 18, 1912, Liangbi suggested that Yuan be kicked out and that Liangbi himself be appointed plenipotentiary minister to organize a royal cabinet. It hardly comes as a surprise that those Manchu nobles were then targeted by revolutionary assassins. On January 26, 1912, on his way back from a meeting, Liangbi was seriously wounded by the revolutionary Peng Jiazhen (1888–1912); he died the next day. Liangbi's death was a heavy blow to the Imperial Court.⁶⁸ This high-profile assassination strongly affected imperial decision making. In its wake, the Manchu nobles were frightened into accepting peaceful abdication instead of launching a futile war of resistance.

The national mood was shifting towards republicanism even in northern China, which was still under Qing control. Indeed, the public was becoming increasingly exasperated over the Imperial Court's hesitancy to surrender power. That discontent was a communal emotion, a shared feeling and a nationwide disposition. The desire for republicanism had

become part of the national mood. In December 1911, many local elites in Zhili publicly called for “the imperial court to declare a republic in order to show its unselfishness and its desire to preserve the unity of China.”⁶⁹ Even Qing diplomats working overseas started to take action. On January 19, 1912, the Qing ambassador to Russia sent a telegram cosigned by other Qing ambassadors in other countries to urge imperial abdication. At home, the people’s petitions for republicanism did not abate; rather, they enjoyed an upsurge.⁷⁰

Note that the foreigners’ response to the ongoing revolution was important in the political life of the time, for it had the capacity to swing Chinese public opinion. Foreigners could not fully control China’s politics, but they could influence their own governments to make forceful responses. Many foreign residents decried the social instability and worried about their personal safety. Overall, those foreigners – especially Westerners – supported the peace talks and a stable government.⁷¹ They had watched the Qing dynasty become moribund; now they turned their backs on it. In early 1912, British merchants bluntly asked the imperial household to leave Beijing and hand power over to Yuan Shikai. American missionaries demanded the imperial abdication so that a republic be established.⁷² Western missionaries first saw hope in Sun Yat-sen, a co-religionist, but soon surmised that he was not the man to stabilize the situation. The missionaries quickly shifted their preference to Yuan, seeing him as the only hope. Other Westerners adopted the same stance. G.E. Morrison stated plainly that Sun had an apparent dearth of knowledge of China and that the only person who could govern the country effectively was Yuan. As one, they believed that the Qing emperor should abdicate immediately.⁷³

Perhaps, the deadliest blow to the crumbling imperial household was a telegram that Duan Qirui and forty-six other military commanders dispatched to the public on January 26, 1912, in which they called for imperial abdication. Stressing the difficulties facing the nation, the people’s suffering, and possible foreign intervention, they demanded that the Imperial Court proclaim a republic. This telegram demonstrated that the army – the vital pillar of the empire – was not unresponsive to the national crisis. But even after this, the Imperial Court continued to stall, ignoring this telegram. The delay angered Duan, who along with other military commanders sent a second public telegram on February 5, 1912. In sharp language, they condemned the Manchu nobles for their obstruction. Duan warned that those nobles’ irresponsible actions had placed the emperor in danger, and he urged the Imperial Court to come to the right

decision. He threatened to march his troops on Beijing and hold face-to-face talks with those nobles.⁷⁴ Rumour had it that Yuan had instructed Duan to dispatch those two telegrams. Whatever the case, Duan's second telegram was an ultimatum for the Qing Empire, as well as its death sentence, for its threatening tone had to be taken seriously.

In this desperate situation, the dynasty was doomed. Even more striking was that the entire nation seemed to have no problem with Yuan as the leader of the new republic. Prominent political groups, including the revolutionaries, the Constitutionalists, and the Imperial Court, as well as the general public, all anticipated that Yuan would soon be governing the country. Zhang Jian, a Constitutionalist leader, strongly supported Yuan as the nation's leader.⁷⁵ The Imperial Court was so helpless that it had to rely on Yuan for conditions favourable for abdication. Still more astonishing was that the revolutionaries themselves were eager for Yuan to ascend to the presidency. Huang Xing expected Yuan to become China's leader if he succeeded in overthrowing the Qing.⁷⁶ Sun Yat-sen had established a provisional government, but even he made it clear that the presidential position was reserved for Yuan (*xuweiyidai*). This support from the revolutionaries was not altruistic; rather, the difficulties faced by the insurgents and Yuan's military power compelled them to offer him their support. In Sun's view, if the emperor abdicated and a republic was established, the revolutionaries would have accomplished their first objective without untold bloodshed and the sacrifice of one hundred thousand troops.⁷⁷

Yuan's reputation as the anticipated national leader now reached its apex, and he was hailed as China's George Washington. On the second day after the imperial abdication, the Nanjing Senate unanimously elected him provisional president of the Republic of China and informed him that "of all the presidential elections in world history, only [George] Washington enjoyed unanimous approval. Now, you [Yuan], sir, have repeated Washington's record. To the world, you are the second Washington in this regard. To our Republican China, you are the first." A few days later, Manchu elite troops, the Eight Banners, delivered Yuan a letter, which read that the "people in North China regard you as China's first Washington; the people from South China see you as the world's second Washington. There is no doubt how much the entire country adores you."⁷⁸

Yuan Shikai was not self-intoxicated, nor was he carried away by the reverberating tributes. He was indifferent to being equated with George Washington, for he was a quick-thinking politician and an astute observer of the changing situation. Seeing that the imperial abdication

had become inevitable, he negotiated with the south for favourable treatment of the imperial household: Puyi would retain his title, enjoy a subsidy of \$4 million, and continue to live in the Imperial Palace. In this way, Yuan prevented violent actions against the imperial family. Yuan was an ambitious politician, as his revision of the abdication edict reveals. It is said that he instructed Zhang Jian and others to draft the edict to help smooth the transition to a republic. The original version stated that “Yuan Shikai holds the absolute authority along with the civilian army [*minjun* – the south] to organize the provisional republican government and discuss the approach for achieving the unification of the country.” Yuan revised this by relocating a few words, thus turning the sentence into “Yuan Shikai holds the absolute authority to organize the provisional republican government and discuss the approach for unifying the country along with the civilian army.”⁷⁹ This revision consigned the south to a minor position. In this way, Yuan legitimized his new government as the inheritor of the Qing Empire; clearly, though, he would be keeping a vigilant eye on the south to forestall any rejection of his new government. Either way, G.E. Morrison noted, China had become “a republic by an imperial decree.”⁸⁰

Yuan’s mindset at the moment of the Qing abdication had shifted towards republicanism. On the day of the abdication, he dispatched a telegram to Sun Yat-sen and other southern leaders, expressing his gratitude and affirming his allegiance to the republic. He declared that

a republic is the best form of government. The whole world admits this. That in one leap we passed from autocracy to republicanism is really the outcome of the many years of strenuous efforts exerted by you all, and is the greatest blessing to the people. The Da Qing [Great Qing] Emperor has proclaimed his abdication by edict countersigned by myself. The day of the proclamation by the edict shall be the end of Imperial rule and the inauguration of the Republic. Henceforth we shall exert our utmost strength to move forward in progress until we reach perfection. Henceforth, forever, we shall not allow a monarchical government in our country.⁸¹

Yuan’s support of republicanism in such compelling language made Sun and the other revolutionaries feel triumphant after so many years of violent revolts and so many months of tough negotiations. For them, the revolution had achieved its goal. But they soon would find that they had been too quick to assume victory and too drunk with the joy of the moment.

CONCLUSION

The 1911 Revolution was a milestone in Chinese history. Besides overthrowing the Qing dynasty, it ended two millennia of imperial rule. Within four months, from the Wuchang Uprising to the imperial abdication, the three-century-old Qing dynasty had come to an abrupt end. Over that time, Yuan's life had changed profoundly. He was first seen as a suppresser of the revolutionary movement, but through peaceful negotiations he had stepped away from monarchism and slowly leaned towards republicanism. Finally, he committed himself to the republic, began propounding revolutionary objectives, and prevented further outbreaks of civil violence. To a degree, Yuan guaranteed the success of the "bloodless" revolution. One scholar notes that it is hard to deny that Yuan had overthrown the Qing dynasty.⁸² Another recently remarked that "Yuan contributed to the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and was the true creator and foremost founder of the Republic of China."⁸³ Yuan's efforts for peace talks "initiated the first such record of solving a political struggle among power claimants through peaceful negotiations."⁸⁴ Western scholars also speak highly of the peace talks. John King Fairbank remarked that through those efforts, "China avoided both prolonged civil war and peasant risings as well as foreign intervention."⁸⁵ Patricia Ebrey states that "unlike the Bourbons in France or Romanovs in Russia, the Manchu royal family suffered neither executions nor humiliation when it was deposed."⁸⁶ If Yuan had not followed the national mood and had not handled the situation adroitly, all kinds of tragedies might have been unleashed.

As they watched Qing disappear, the revolutionaries expressed their gratitude to Yuan for his role in bringing an end to the old regime. Sun Yat-sen stated that "as for the persuasion of the Qing to abdicate, the building of the republic, and the creation of North-South unity, Mr. Yuan's contributions are solely indispensable."⁸⁷ No one in 1912 condemned Yuan as a usurper or a national thief; those rhetorical political flourishes were the product of a much later time. A balanced analysis shows that Yuan took advantage of the complicated situation and calculated potential gains and losses. The negative and strongly politicized image that later attached itself to him awaited an objective review, which has finally appeared in recent decades. Most scholars now agree that the collapse of the Qing was the result of diverse political forces, including the actions of the revolutionaries, the Constitutionalists, the Beiyang troops, and others. It was those combined forces (*heli*) working together that brought about imperial abdication.⁸⁸ It must be noted that all of

those forces had chosen Yuan as the national leader, believing that he could stabilize the nation, for he had experience in running a state. Thus Yuan came to power through a political compromise. More importantly, he had obtained his power through legal means. In the south he was elected by the Senate, and in the north he was empowered by imperial edict. That is why one scholar claimed that “Yuan was the first man to gain unified supreme power through legal procedures.”⁸⁹

Recent studies show that all the political groups after the imperial abdication felt blessed with multiple satisfactions, at least for the time being. The outcome of the transition from empire to republic seemed as though it might not be bad for anyone. The imperial household was treated with dignity and provided with subsidies. It did not suffer violence, unlike other royal families in modern revolutions. For the Constitutionalists, the new republic had more than symbolic value, for it would allow them to participate in governance and the crafting of legislation. The revolutionaries were satisfied, for their top priority had been to end Manchu rule. During the past months’ standoff at the peace negotiations, the key issue had been imperial abdication. With imperial rule gone, the revolutionaries were elated, viewing it as a great victory. The Beiyang Clique was the greatest beneficiary, for its leader was now president of the republic. The peaceful transition from empire to republic at such a low cost created a quadrangle of wins, as the resulting state seemed to be what they all had hoped for. All of the power claimants felt they had been relieved of a heavy burden; even so, the future road would be rocky, for each of those different groups continued to champion their own political agendas. In any case, the negotiations that resulted in the founding of a new republic epitomized the Chinese people’s desire to solve problems peacefully.⁹⁰

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Provisional President

Needless to say, Yuan's provisional presidency from the collapse of the Qing Empire on February 12, 1912, to his assumption of the presidency of the Republic of China on October 10, 1913, marked an important transition in his life. For China as a nation, the political shift from empire to republic was unprecedented; for Yuan as an individual, his journey from Qing official to provisional president was theatrical. The imperial abdication edict had empowered him to organize the republican government, and the Nanjing Senate had elected him provisional president. Yuan accepted the offer while promising to support the republic, although he did not fully understand republicanism and did not comprehend the democratic mechanism. He was a reformer but not a democrat. When he became provisional president, he encountered the "new uncertainties" of post-imperial change, as Mary Backus Rankin puts it.¹ Could Yuan continue to use old approaches to handle the new uncertainties? Yuan set out to build a strong, modern, unified state. But the suddenness of the transition to republic posed a challenge. In the process of handling those uncertainties, Yuan would have to adapt himself to the new realities.

When Yuan became provisional president, China was in a dangerous state of flux and a multitude of problems were emerging. Political strife among diverse groups was as much of a headache as the economic quandary China faced. The founding of the republic and Yuan's provisional presidency had been the result of a political compromise among various groups, including Yuan's Beiyang Clique, Sun Yat-sen's revolutionaries, and Liang Qichao's Constitutionalists. They all shared in the excitement

when the republic was proclaimed, but their diverse interests and objectives set them far apart. The first year was a honeymoon, for they all were hopeful, anticipating bright prospects; all were mindful that the republic was China's first democratic experiment and a turning point in China's long civilization. A Western-style representative system was seen by many as a vehicle for problem-solving. Unfortunately, most Chinese were not familiar with republicanism. They longed for stability, security, peace, and prosperity. With this popular will in mind, Yuan focused his authority on achieving those objectives.

Yuan's provisional presidency has not been neglected. Indeed, it was closely scrutinized by scholars throughout the past century, as evidenced by the profusion of writings about it. However, his provisional presidency for a long time did not attract endorsement in spite of the heavy coverage. Traditional historiography portrays Yuan as a power-hungry politician, an underhanded conspirator, a counter-revolutionary, and, according to some scholars, "an extremely important representative of the reactionary politics of the landlord class" who endeavoured to retain the old conventions.² Twentieth-century revolutionary movements compelled or influenced many to abandon any effort at an objective evaluation and to embrace this radically negative view. Only in recent decades have scholars begun to study Yuan's political career during this time span without prejudice; as a result, a revisionist perspective has started to emerge. According to the new interpretation, Yuan did not simply lounge on his presidential seat; on the contrary, he contributed to the young republic through his reform policies.

MANIPULATING THE FIRST DEMOCRACY

Yuan Shikai did not design the republican system; rather, he accepted it through political compromise. The new republic led by Yuan, which R. Keith Schoppa terms "the high point of electoral democracy," marked a sea change in Chinese history.³ When Yuan embraced it, he promised to ensure a smooth transition from empire to republic. According to Sun Yat-sen's blueprint, the republic must be a democratic institution in which power was balanced, separated, and shared. For it to succeed, Sun asked the senate in Nanjing to pass the Provisional Constitution, which specified that the republic would have a president, a premier, a cabinet, a national congress, and other organs. This great experiment did not grow naturally from China's soil. In early 1912, Sun set three conditions for Yuan's

assumption of the provisional presidency: Nanjing would be the national capital, Yuan would assume his presidency in Nanjing, and Yuan would have to respect the Provisional Constitution. Yuan accepted those conditions but soon chafed at the restrictions they posed, whereby Sun hoped to turn him into a titular head of state in order to forestall any possible drift away from republicanism on Yuan's part.

To implement the north-south agreement, Sun Yat-sen dispatched a five-member welcoming delegation (*huanyingtuán*) to Beijing to invite Yuan to proceed to Nanjing for the inauguration of his provisional presidency. The delegation consisted of Cai Yuanpei, Wei Chenzu, Niu Yongjian, Song Jiaoren, and Wang Jingwei. Events when they arrived changed the original plan. The traditional view is that Yuan desired to seize power and did not want to leave his power base in Beijing. So to legitimize staying in Beijing, he engineered an excuse. Two days after the delegates arrived, a well-orchestrated riot broke out, now known as the Beijing Mutiny. Orthodox historiography blamed Yuan as the instigator, for the soldiers who participated in the riot were drawn from the Beiyang Army. During the riot, 4,600 stores in Beijing, Tianjin, Baoding, Tongzhou, and other cities were looted and burned down or otherwise damaged. The five delegates fled to the foreign concessions. This mutiny and the uncertainty that followed it made it imperative that Yuan stay in the north to ensure national stability. Cai Yuanpei agreed to a compromise with Yuan: he could assume his post in Beijing. According to Shang Xiaoming's recent research, Yuan indeed benefited from this mutiny, but he was not the instigator. Shang used primary sources to reject the widely accepted account and to argue that there were no grounds to accuse Yuan of fomenting the mutiny. Rather, it was set in motion by Yuan's son, Yuan Keding, and Yuan's subordinate, Cao Kun. The mutiny actually damaged Yuan Shikai's reputation, for it tarnished his image as an effective national leader.⁴

On March 10, 1912, after the dust had settled, Yuan assumed his post as provisional president, in Beijing. Yuan swore to defend the republic, uphold the Provisional Constitution, wipe out any lingering traces of tyranny, support ethnic harmony, and safeguard territorial integrity. He also vowed that he would step down as soon as Congress elected the first formal president the following year. With this solemn pledge, he declared himself the guardian of the newly established republic. Yet Yuan's understanding of republicanism was superficial. On one occasion he asked his subordinate, Wellington Koo, what the word "republic" meant and pressed him for answers to further questions.⁵ The original sources

left by Yuan demonstrate that he had only a slight understanding of the republic as a non-monarchical state. His perception was that the republic was owned by the four hundred million citizens and that national sovereignty did not rest in the hands of a single man from a royal family. The republic was more a public asset than private property.⁶ Yuan did not acquire a deep understanding of democracy and its routine operations and functions. His support of republicanism was praiseworthy, but his superficial understanding of it would soon raise more problems than benefits.

As Yuan struggled to adapt to the new system, he was troubled by the distribution and balance of power. Under the Provisional Constitution, it was the premier who wielded the real power, for it was he who represented the majority party in Congress. This placed Yuan in a weak position. As a consequence, the first power struggle faced by the republic occurred between Yuan as provisional president and Tang Shaoyi as premier. Tang had been Yuan's long-time subordinate before joining the Tongmenghui during the 1911 Revolution. This first power struggle tested the viability of the first democracy in terms of sharing and balancing power. Yuan's refusal to accept the merely titular position of president set him on a collision course with Tang. His attempts to turn Tang into a yes man met strong resistance. In the first months of the republic, the two clashed over a number of issues. The last straw concerned the appointment of the governor of Zhili. When Tang Shaoyi chose Wang Zhixiang, Yuan bluntly rejected Tang's appointment. At the same time, Yuan used Duan Qirui and Zhao Bingjun, two ministers in the cabinet, to render Tang powerless. These actions compelled Tang to resign after serving as China's first premier for just a few months. The Beiyang Clique supported Yuan, and Feng Guozhang stated that the president "should have the same power [the] US president does, and he should have the power to dissolve Congress as the French president does. Our president should have unlimited power in order to achieve his ambitious objectives."⁷

Yuan's goodwill towards Sun Yat-sen and Huang Xing provided one of the rare conciliatory political moments during the early republic. They served as Yuan's chance to display his commitment to the young republic. At Yuan's invitation, Sun arrived in Beijing on August 24, 1912. Yuan received Sun graciously, vacating his residence on Shidaren Lane so that Sun could stay there. At the welcoming reception, Yuan praised Sun for his significant contribution to the republic. During Sun's three-week visit to Beijing, he met Yuan thirteen times. The two men candidly exchanged ideas on various issues. Sun's impression of Yuan was positive, and he

portrayed Yuan as “a charming and fateful hero.”⁸ After Huang Xing’s arrival in Beijing on September 11, 1912, he formed the same impression of Yuan. In fact, both Sun and Huang were fascinated by Yuan’s amicability and expressed their willingness to endorse him as China’s first formal president. Sun spoke highly of Yuan: “President Yuan has been our friend and he was not disloyal to the republic. Therefore, citizens in our country should not suspect this man and criticize him.”⁹ After his meeting with Yuan, Huang Xing praised him as a great man and called on the people to support him in his ambitious reconstruction plans.¹⁰

Their honeymoon culminated in the public announcement of a state-building proposition, known as the Four Giants Proclamation (*Sijutouxuanyan*) because it was co-signed by four political giants: Yuan Shikai, Sun Yat-sen, Huang Xing, and Li Yuanhong. In fact, the other three were merely endorsing Yuan’s eight-point proclamation of September 18, 1912. That proclamation included the following broad ideas: a unified national system; “justice for righteousness”; military training to strengthen the army and navy; absorption of foreign capital for enterprises; the encouragement of agriculture, finance, industry, and commerce; centralization of the military, diplomacy, finance, the judiciary, and transportation; national financial reform; and harmonization of partisan relationships.¹¹ This proclamation was the crystallization of collaboration among the power players and was a healthy political development. Unfortunately, this honeymoon did not last – civil war would break out between Yuan and Sun within a year.

Yuan had unique views regarding how to organize republican organs. For years, he had been calling for a national congress to build legislative authority. He felt that on being elected, legislators should gather in the congress to deliberate over issues and pass laws. He called on all members of the congress to work diligently to serve the nation.¹² He endorsed bipartisan coexistence, remarking that “a state should allow political parties, without which the benefits of political deliberation and consultation cannot be obtained.” He did not support one-party dominance.¹³ He stated that “a country without political parties couldn’t be a strong country, but the state will perish if only one party is in charge. Without parties, competition does not exist, but tyranny will emerge if only one party controls.”¹⁴ In the event, hundreds of political parties arose in the early republic, which led to intense political strife. Facing this situation, Yuan’s attitude at first was neutral. In summarizing his position, he observed that “now political parties were established like trees in the forest. It is hard to determine whichever is good or bad. My own opinion

is that I don't oppose any of them and that I don't support any of them at the meantime."¹⁵ He found problems in China's partisan operations, commenting that

China's partisan politics differs from others, because it is purely based on personal emotion rather than ultimate national interest. It will be a great danger to the republic's future domestic and diplomatic affairs, if no parties desire to make sacrifices and compromise. I fear that our country which did not perish during tyranny will perish in the post-revolution partisan struggle.¹⁶

Yuan Shikai's refusal to join any political party and his disinclination to organize his own party strongly shaped early Republican politics. After the imperial abdication, four major political forces coexisted in China's national arena: the Beiyang Clique led by Yuan Shikai, the revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen, the Constitutionalists led by Liang Qichao, and the provincial power claimants.¹⁷ Because Yuan was serving as provisional president, all newly established political parties wooed him, but he resolutely refused to join any of them. Gradually two prominent political parties took shape in Congress: the Nationalist Party, reorganized from the Tongmenghui by Sun's follower Song Jiaoren, and the Progress Party, reorganized from the Constitutionalists by Liang Qichao. Yuan endeavoured to bring those parties under his control but faced numerous challenges from them in doing so. Had he organized the Beiyang Clique into his own party, the political landscape might have developed differently, for it might have been one of the largest, which would have helped him handle political affairs. His refusal to do this arose from his perception that he was above partisan politics. He believed he should hold the supreme and indivisible power and that the power below him could be divided by contention.

Yuan had his own vision of the relationship between political parties and the cabinet. He knew that the cabinet was important, but he thought that it should be an advisory body subordinate to him and that ultimate power should be vested in him to defend national unity and revive the nation's strength. He also rejected the notion that only the majority party in Congress could organize a cabinet, with its leader as premier. Yuan's attitude was a function of his vigilance against the rising Nationalist Party, which was growing rapidly. Rejecting the Nationalists' proposal for a single-party cabinet, he recommended a cabinet (*hunchengneige*) in which ministers would be drawn from different parties.¹⁸ He believed that

an “elite” cabinet (*rencaïneige*) with talents drawn from the main political parties could bring an end to partisan contention and prevent one-party dictatorship.¹⁹ But his proposal was anathema to the Nationalists, who viewed it as political centralism and bureaucratic authoritarianism on his part.

The republic was a sprawling new institution, imported from the West and planted in an uncertain environment. Chinese traditions could not simply be vanquished overnight along with the Imperial Court. Yuan had been an official of the old regime and could not detach himself entirely from the old conventions. As a newly minted republican, he desired political compromise, but at the same time, his plans for political unity, social stability, economic recovery, and an expanded military set him on a collision course with the new system. His desire for state-building and his dissatisfaction with his titular position led him to fume over the restraints on his power. He remarked that the Provisional Constitution “had shackled this government ... while I am the head of the state I deeply suffer distress directly from it, and the four hundred million compatriots all have to indirectly undergo agony from it.”²⁰ He visualized the republic as a shop: the citizens might be the owners, but the “president is the leading owner and ministers are managers of the store.”²¹ In his opinion, paramount power had to be vested in the president. This inevitably led to confrontation, with Yuan on one side and the cabinet and Congress on the other. Historians of the revolution have blamed Yuan for building a despotic regime. Yet recent scholarship shows that China was not ready for Western-style democracy and that the structure of the new republic was flawed: there were no clear lines to demarcate power between president and the premier, and the checks and balances between president and Congress were not well-defined.²²

SUPPRESSING THE REVOLUTIONARIES

Yuan’s authoritarian bent became increasingly pronounced during the republic’s first years. Powerful forces were causing the young republic to flounder in uncharted political waters and were shaping the intense political struggle. In this complicated situation, Yuan endeavoured to establish authoritarian power, employing his available resources to divide his opponents. He aligned himself closely with the Constitutionalists, managed the local players, and clashed badly with the Nationalists. Indeed, most of the political conflicts occurred between Yuan and the Nationalists. At first,

those clashes were conducted by legal means, but those constraints eventually dissolved, and both sides resorted to armed struggle in 1913. Their final split would send the young republic down a new political path.

The 1911 Revolution had not brought national unity; rather, it resulted in a colourful mosaic of multiple forces, especially in the provinces. Local power brokers exerted centrifugal influences while dominating their local societies. Many former revolutionaries were now acting as local overlords. They were not monolithic, though, for each overlord's power was concentrated in a limited geographical area. Yuan spent much of his time dealing with regional leaders. The case of Zhang Zhenwu illustrates this. Zhang had participated in the Wuchang Uprising as a military officer. He collided with Li Yuanhong, the military governor of Hubei, and he continued to defy Li even after the latter became vice-president of the republic. Li accused Zhang of raising a private army of six hundred men, embezzling public funds, extorting local businesses, intervening in legal cases, and taking ten concubines in a short time. Even more disastrously, Zhang often called for a new violent revolution.²³ In Li's words, Zhang had degenerated into a villainous local despot. Yuan requested a meeting with him, and Zhang arrived in Beijing on August 8, 1912. Immediately after Zhang left for Beijing, Li sent Yuan a telegram pleading with him to execute Zhang. Yuan arrested Zhang and immediately had him put to death. Needless to say, the case shocked the nation. To justify his action, Yuan published Li's telegraph and also enumerated Zhang's crimes. This case did not lead to any further disturbances; it does, though, demonstrate Yuan's efforts to centralize the fragmented local forces.

Yuan moved to disband the southern military forces that had formed during the revolution. By one estimate, there were nearly one million soldiers in China in early 1912, and this placed a huge financial burden on the state. Local troops often staged mutinies when their pay was delayed. More ominous was the fact that many of these troops were not under Yuan's command and were a potential threat to his regime. Yuan began demobilizing them in late April 1912.²⁴ His plan was to reduce the national armed forces from nearly a million to half a million in fifty divisions. In Jiangsu, Anhui, Hunan, and Sichuan, sixteen divisions were disbanded.²⁵ In Nanjing, one hundred thousand troops under the command of Huang Xing were stood down. By June 1912, only one-third of the original forces remained in Nanjing, and these were reorganized into three new divisions. Yuan praised the military commanders for their selfless efforts to demobilize and allocated funds to help them accomplish it. According to Yuan, "it is easy to recruit soldiers but hard to demobilize them," because soldiers

joined the army as a way of life.²⁶ In any case, the disarmament was conducive to Yuan's state-building while detrimental to his potential rivals. Not surprisingly, the Nationalists complained that they suffered the most from this, for their troops had been reduced to insignificant numbers, in contrast to Yuan's Beiyang Army, which was not greatly affected.

To prevent local forces from becoming regional hegemons, Yuan in June 1912 began to enforce a policy of separation of powers between the military command and the civilian administration in the provinces. This was essential to Yuan's centralizing efforts: he worried that the new state was turning into a rump republic as local power claimants ignored the central government while merging local military and civil power. Very often, local military commanders were abusing their power by intervening in local politics and court cases. Their integrated power was so deeply embedded in local affairs that it was impeding the effective implementation of state policies. Yuan issued many orders prohibiting the army from intervening in politics, warning that "reckless military intervention into politics can cause national disturbances, endanger the national future ... and lead to disastrous calamities."²⁷ The separation seems to have been a double-edged sword, because the policy also affected the Beiyang Army, prohibiting it from involvement in politics. Yuan's intention was to force the local powers to surrender their authority to his central government.

Regrettably, Yuan's government had to rely on foreign loans for its routine functions, because of a perpetual shortage of funds. The Reorganization Loan (*shanhou dajiekuan*) that he arranged in 1913 should be viewed in the context of his political struggle against the Nationalists. China's new government faced huge deficits. The ongoing Boxer reparation payments had depleted China's finances. As the rump republic grew more divided, the provinces began refusing to transfer their local taxes to Beijing. As a consequence, the annual national income of Yuan's government amounted to only a fraction of that of the former Qing Empire. The staggering financial difficulties compelled Yuan to borrow in order that the country might live. In late April 1913, his government signed a controversial agreement with a five-power banking consortium (Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan) to borrow twenty-five million pounds. The loan conditions were harsh: the interest rates were high, the fees charged were exorbitant, the lenders reserved the right to intervene in tax management, and mortgaging of salt returns, and only 10.2 million pounds of the 25 million could be transferred to Yuan's government.²⁸ Jerome Chen calculates that China would eventually have to pay back 43 million pounds to liquidate the loan. US president Woodrow Wilson viewed this loan as

“obnoxious to the principles upon which the government of our people rests.”²⁹ The Nationalists strongly resisted the loan, but Yuan powered it through, in no small part to strengthen his hand when dealing with the Nationalists. Koji Hirata notes that the loan was “one of the major contributors to Yuan’s victory” in the looming civil war.³⁰

The first national congressional election deeply pained Yuan, for it led to Nationalist dominance of the legislature. The election season opened in late 1912, under voting restrictions related to property possession, educational attainment, and other personal qualifications. In fact, the majority of citizens were excluded. Led by Song Jiaoren (1882–1913), the Nationalist Party emerged triumphant. Song had travelled to the provinces and delivered speeches to swing eligible voters to his party. He was eloquent, energetic, and compelling. He did not challenge Yuan directly, instead pinning his hopes on achieving a majority in Congress to realize his goal of building a responsible cabinet. This set him on a collision course with Yuan. In the event, the Nationalist Party won 269 out of 596 seats in the House of Representatives and 123 out of 274 seats in the Senate.³¹ This result stymied Yuan, for it enabled the Nationalists to become the majority party in Congress and presented it with a mandate to organize a responsible cabinet. The victorious Nationalists became confidently optimistic.

The assassination of Song Jiaoren shattered the Nationalists’ hopes as well as their relationship with Yuan Shikai. Song had planned to be premier, but on March 20, 1913, at the Shanghai railway station, he was shot and wounded. Two days later, he died. This event dominated the national spotlight. The police in Shanghai arrested the murderer, Wu Shiying, a former soldier who had fallen to become a homeless wanderer on the streets of Shanghai. Wu had been paid to kill Song by Ying Guixin, the leader of a secret society. Further investigation revealed that Ying had ties with Hong Shuzu, a secretary for Premier Zhao Bingjun, who was a protégé of Yuan’s. In other words, the chain of relationships led back to the government in Beijing. It remains a mystery whether Yuan or Zhao was directly involved. Ever since, diverse theories have been entertained. Many individuals were accused of being parties to the crime, including Yuan Shikai, Zhao Bingjun, Hong Shuzu, and Ying Guixin. To this day, no unanimous conclusion has been reached. That said, the general consensus among the Nationalists was that Yuan was behind the crime; Sun Yat-sen angrily asserted that “it is a fact that the Beijing Government’s involvement in this case cannot ever be concealed.”³² Sun urged Yuan to resign to prevent further trouble.³³

Was Yuan behind Song's murder, as the Nationalists charged? He denied any involvement, stating that "after the Song case occurred, rumors abound. Almost everyone in the government became a suspect. This case is very serious, but the truth will surely be revealed one day."³⁴ Yuan called for the case to be solved through legal procedure and advised people not to believe rumours before the courts reached a verdict. He admitted that a certain tie between Hong Shuzu and Ying Guixin had existed, and he asked the nation to pay attention to the police investigation and the ensuing court case.³⁵ On May 7, 1913, Yuan dismissed Hong Shuzu from his official position.³⁶ Because civil war broke out soon afterwards, no court verdict was ever reached. Recent studies indicate that Yuan was not involved and point out that the assassination did not meet his political needs. Song was not Yuan's direct rival, and the murder could not solve any political issues. Even if Song had organized a cabinet, Yuan could have developed a better strategy to deal with it. Yuan wanted to change the constitution, not eliminate a political rival. More disastrously, killing Song would have risked his own reputation. Zhang Yong argues that the assassination was not in Yuan's interests and that a secret society had carried it out.³⁷ Shang Xiaoming claims that Yuan had no plan to kill Song and points out that the murder deeply shocked him.³⁸ He argues that the initiator of the murder was Hong Shuzu, who had his own complicated motives for recruiting Ying to carry out the assassination.³⁹

The Song case was a watershed in relations between Yuan and Sun. Before it, they had been able to work together and negotiate compromises; after it, they became bitter enemies. On hearing of Song's murder, Sun called for a new armed revolution, although some Nationalists favoured legal recourse. Yuan, too, prepared for potential military conflict, mobilizing his troops and targeting the Lower Yangtze Valley, where the Nationalists were concentrated. Yuan's order to remove three Nationalist provincial governors from their positions – Li Liejun in Jiangxi, Hu Hanmin in Guangdong, and Bai Wenwei in Anhui – escalated the confrontation. On July 12, 1913, Li Liejun issued an anti-Yuan declaration, which launched the Second Revolution. Within a few weeks, the following regions declared independence from Yuan's central government: Jiangxi, Jiangsu, Anhui, Shanghai, Guangdong, Fujian, Hunan, and Chongqing. The military clashes broke out mainly in Jiangxi and Jiangsu, although other regions saw fighting as well. The Song assassination prompted the southern provinces to launch a new revolution with the intent of overthrowing Yuan.⁴⁰

The Nationalists' actions drew a quick response from Yuan. At first, he planned to invite Sun Yat-sen and Huang Xing to Beijing to solve the crisis peacefully, but the changing situation compelled him to crush the Second Revolution. He used propaganda to demonize the Nationalists and to justify his military campaign. He accused Sun of "revolutionary proclivity," by which he meant that Sun knew nothing about construction, only destruction.⁴¹ He remarked that "Sun Yat-sen and Huang Xing have no real ability besides causing disturbances and bringing troubles."⁴² In Yuan's view, only he had the authority to handle national affairs. In a public proclamation, he condemned Sun and his Nationalists for committing treason by working to overthrow the central government. He assailed them as destructive public enemies and unforgivable national villains.⁴³ After fierce fighting, Yuan was able to occupy strategic locations in July and August. On September 1, 1913, Nanjing fell into Yuan's hands, marking the end of the Second Revolution. Sun and his Nationalists were driven into exile, in particular, to Japan. This military conflict wreaked havoc on the local people as the Beiyang Army ransacked Nanjing and harassed the local residents. Yuan, meanwhile, claimed to have achieved security by eliminating the rebels.

There were many reasons why Yuan came out the victor. The strength disparity between the two armies gave him the upper hand. Yuan's army was well-trained, and the Reorganization Loan had boosted his military capacity. Internal divisions among the Nationalists also hurt Sun. The foreign powers' support for Yuan should also be remembered and so should the national yearning for stability rather than another revolution. The general public was troubled by Song's assassination, but most Chinese supported Yuan's call for it to be resolved through legal means.⁴⁴ Many members of the elite regarded the revolution as completed and refused to endorse a second one. People longed for peace, unity, and security. Furthermore, the Nationalists were not offering an "overall program or direction" that would recruit the public to their Second Revolution.⁴⁵ The national mood in fact favoured Yuan and even rewarded him for his actions. One foreign reporter wrote that Yuan's government "received the support of the great mass of the people, but unfortunately, a turbulent band of desperados has ruthlessly sought to plunge the country into anarchy." Consequently, many Chinese stood with Yuan, and "hundreds of telegrams from all parts of China reached the President daily, begging him to suppress the rebellion unflinchingly."⁴⁶

It must be noted that the Constitutionalists, led by Liang Qichao and other elites, had a strong impact on the Second Revolution. They

seriously weakened Sun Yat-sen by firmly taking Yuan's side. From a historical perspective, the Constitutionalists were Sun's political rivals in that they called for a different approach to nation-building and state-building. They forsook violence and embraced parliamentary politics. With Yuan's support, the Constitutionalists organized the Progress Party (*Jinbudang*) on May 29, 1913, just before the Second Revolution broke out. The Constitutionalists made it clear that they detested violence, and they urged Yuan to exterminate the revolutionaries. Liang Qichao viewed Sun's move as mob politics (*baominzhengzhi*) and declared that "the scourge of mob politics would be more disastrous than deluge and wild animals."⁴⁷ He justified Yuan's suppression and fully supported his decision to wipe out the "mobs." Tang Hualong, another Constitutionalist, vilified the revolutionaries as "true rebels who committed treason. They must be immediately exterminated. Their disastrous activities must be confined to a small range in order not to ravage the quiet of the national situation."⁴⁸ As the second-largest political party in Congress, the Progress Party gave firm support to Yuan, which also contributed to Yuan's victory.

The resulting suppression was followed by ferocious political persecution of the Nationalists, which Ernest P. Young referred to as "the terror" because of Yuan's bloodily repressive measures. Yuan had wielded his power to enforce measures "demanding obedience instead of winning loyalty." Around one thousand activists were killed and more were jailed.⁴⁹ The purge targeted those who had supported or collaborated with the Nationalists during the Second Revolution. Any real or alleged connection could lead to imprisonment. Those accused were not given a fair trial, and some were not given *any* trial. Some imprisoned Nationalists were quickly executed. Freedom of speech was suspended, and more than forty newspapers were ordered to close their doors. Editors, writers, and columnists who were critical of Yuan suffered maltreatment. Strict censorship made it hard to voice different opinions. The autonomy of civil organizations was curtailed, as was the independence of political parties. In the name of social order, Yuan's government sent out police to search for rebels and bandits, thus traumatizing those who were merely suspected. Members of Congress had no guarantee of their own safety; several legislators were put to death and others were incarcerated.⁵⁰ After the Second Revolution, Yuan's power soared to new heights. Meanwhile, Sun Yat-sen had suffered an unprecedented blow.

Yuan's military victory had brought him an immense advantage by securing his authority and allowing him to extend it to Anhui, Jiangsu, Hunan, Guangdong, and Fujian. Although local forces continued to

exist, Yuan's patent of centralism, originally conferred by the expiring Qing, allowed him to exercise absolute power. Now that the Nationalists could no longer curb him, Yuan found himself unbound from previous restrictions, and he began to move away from constitutional rule. In the political arena, the Nationalists' approach to state-building was a thing of the past; only Yuan's state-building approach held any sway. This centralizing tendency would soon lead inevitably to dictatorship. It is fair to say that the Second Revolution enormously changed the prospects for Sun and his followers. Faced with persecution, Sun's Nationalists returned to their old, violent ways. As the republic's first civil war, the Second Revolution dramatically impacted the country by allowing Yuan to centralize power in his own hands and prompting Sun to seek a new paradigm for his political struggle.⁵¹

YUAN'S PROGRESSIVE POLICIES

As mentioned, Yuan Shikai long suffered under a negative image. Many condemned him as an evil man who schemed for power and cared only for himself. In the words of Li Zongyi, he "pursued a feudalist and tyrannical unity."⁵² Yet recent research has cast new light on the progressive policies he brought forward during his provisional presidency. New scholarship has revealed the variety of roles he played. As historians move away from the radical historical interpretation, they are discovering Yuan's positive contributions.⁵³ Scholars often cite Sun Yat-sen's praise of Yuan as a clever, insightful, and reform-minded leader when judging Yuan's administrative performance. Sun had supported Yuan before the Song assassination and even justified his many actions, including his execution of Zhang Zhenwu. Yuan had bridged the chasm that China faced between empire and republic, engineered a relatively peaceful transition, promoted the Chinese people's acceptance of the republic, fostered social advancement, and endeavoured to establish an efficient government. It is true that he used old tricks to rule the new state, but his moves, whether old or new, drew large numbers of Chinese to accept, tolerate, and support both the new state and his leadership.

When Yuan became provisional president, he was besieged by multiple forces: submissive associates, hostile royalists, enthusiastic revolutionaries, ambitious Constitutionals, and many others. During the country's abrupt transition to a republic, some of these forces experienced discomfit, some felt grief and sorrow, and some were ecstatic.

Any mismanagement of state affairs could have caused chaos. According to Yuan's plan, he would "act to benefit the country, with the utmost goal of safety and security as the priority. Public opinion among the majority should not be violated."⁵⁴ In other words, having assumed the provisional presidency, Yuan set about his task with an eye towards stabilizing the country. To do so, he advised public officials who were hesitant to accept republicanism to embrace the new system. At the same time, he promised that Qing laws, as long as they did not conflict with the new constitution, would remain in effect to guarantee social order before changes were made.⁵⁵ In particular, he ordered the army to obey orders, assist public security, and endorse republicanism.⁵⁶ He issued an amnesty that granted prisoners their freedom so long as they were not murderers or bandits.⁵⁷ Noting the heavy financial burden on the people, he ended the pre-republican system that taxed the people according to land acreage, household size, and other parameters, thereby offering farmers tax relief.⁵⁸ At the same time, he fell hard on anyone who planned to disrupt the new order. For example, he supported the suppression of an uprising led by royalists in Manchuria who tried to restore the Qing.⁵⁹

Yuan strongly promoted ethnic harmony and the equal status of all ethnic groups. He ordered that ethnic issues be handled by the Department of the Interior.⁶⁰ He declared that the five major ethnic groups – Han, Manchus, Mongols, Hui Muslims, and Tibetans – were equal in the new republic. To promote this, he urged all ethnicities to strengthen friendship, encourage intermarriage, eliminate discord, and facilitate understanding. Yuan saw the old prohibition against ethnic intermarriage as a barrier to national unity and believed that only intermarriage could foster a new ethnic harmony.⁶¹ He strongly opposed any publications that contained overt prejudice or that called for discrimination against ethnic minorities. Noting the number of anti-Manchu books and magazines in circulation, he placed the Manchu issue under the spotlight, ordering that such publications be forbidden as anathema to republican values. These anti-Manchu publications were to be confiscated and destroyed and it would be illegal to reprint them.⁶² Despite all this, Yuan had to address an upsurge in ethnic tensions and separatism in the frontier regions. During one such episode, he had to persuade the Mongol elite in Outer Mongolia to remain within the new republic; to that end, he communicated with Mongol nobles and endeavoured to convince them to put a stop to separatism and separatist sentiment.⁶³

To bring social tranquility, Yuan took measures to centralize power so as to prevent the state's disintegration. His efforts to disarm local military

forces and to separate provincial civil and military duties were intended to deal with potential threats. He was vigilant about secret societies, which were organized without government approval and which operated outside government control. In his view, secret societies functioned outside the constitution, poisoned the local populace, and imperilled the social order.⁶⁴ They also endorsed assassination, deception, and destruction. This weakened the government, divided society, and ravaged the community. So he offered options to the members of the secret societies. If they disbanded their organizations, expressed regret, and followed the government's rules, they would face no penalties. If they reformed their organizations accordingly, they could be protected by the law. If they continued to cause social unrest, they would be severely punished. He ordered provincial civil and military leaders to pay special attention to secret societies to forestall potential disturbances. In cases of unrest, the local authorities could arrest, detain, disband, and penalize the society's leaders and even its general members. Yuan told the nation that disbanding the secret societies was one of the goals of his state-building.⁶⁵

To promote modern ways, Yuan adopted the Western calendar. China was an ancient civilization that had developed its own way to measure time using its own thousand-year-old calendar. Indeed, the Chinese calendar, so deeply rooted in the nation's social, economic, and cultural life, had become an inseparable part of the Chinese way of life. By adopting the Western calendar, Yuan was demonstrating that the republic would be a new state and that the Chinese would be starting a new way of life. This demonstrated Yuan's desire to steer China onto a modern trajectory. He ordered all citizens to adopt the new calendar, including merchants, who from that day on were to conduct their transactions accordingly.⁶⁶ He ordered the creation of national holidays according to the new calendar. For example, October 10, anniversary of the Wuchang Uprising, became "National Day." The "Double Ten" festival differed from traditional festivals in that it was not rooted in ancient mysteries, nor did it have a long history; instead, it was based on events that had transpired just a few months earlier. By Yuan's order, the Double Ten was to be a day of joyous celebration, public festivals, and colourful processions. Citizens were to be released from work. The recent political transition was to be honoured, and republicanism venerated. It was to be observed throughout the nation to glorify the fledgling republic and the new state's values.⁶⁷

The new republic and the old regime were to differ greatly in many respects, according to Yuan. For example, the new republican government was to be staffed by efficient and qualified people. He remarked at

one point that “a republican government without high quality politics cannot guarantee people’s happiness.” He also insisted that “the origin of corruption in provincial politics arises from mismanagement of officialdom and unproductive implementation of rules.” He emphasized officials’ administrative experience and knowledge of modern politics. He enforced measures to assess administrators’ performances: “if an incumbent administrator lacks experience and does not achieve anything, he should be removed from his position.”⁶⁸ Instead of meting out penalties, he offered rewards to those who did excellent work. An efficient administration would strengthen the republic, for when officials exerted their talents, ordinary citizens benefited greatly. He told the nation that it was his responsibility as provisional president to appoint and remove officials and that his focus would be on constitutionality, officials’ qualifications, and the arrangement of government organs.⁶⁹ But he did not intend to punish honest officials when they encountered financial burdens owing to recent expenditures on military affairs or urgent issues. Rather, he proposed exonerating them as long as they were honourable and competent.⁷⁰

To ensure a high standard of accountability and reliability, Yuan established a new civil service system on January 9, 1913; thereafter, officials would be selected through a process of examinations. This new system, which resembled the Western civil service system, had two levels. Level One allowed male citizens above twenty-five years old who had earned a college education to participate in four examinations triennially. The first three examinations were written tests, the last was an oral exam. The written examinations tested a candidate’s knowledge of science, technology, law, literature, economics, agriculture, and other subjects. Level Two allowed male citizens above twenty years old who had earned a technical school education to participate triennially. A successful examinee who could pass three examinations – two written and one oral – would be hired as a low-level administrator. After a certain period of employment, if incompetent, a person could be removed from his position, for his liabilities might inflict harm on the local population.⁷¹ A successful examination might guarantee a position, but it was a civil servant’s own proficient performance that entitled him to keep his job. Recent scholarship emphasizes the positive impact of Yuan’s civil service system, in that it created competition and avoided corruption. Yuan’s policies did not yield many short-term prominent achievements, because the many wars that followed his death caused his policies to be suspended for a time; however, they would play a positive role in modernizing China’s political system over the long term.⁷²

Yuan always encouraged the Chinese to pursue a modern education that balanced science, literature, and other disciplines. He perceived some serious problems as more new schools were established. The school year had become shorter, and its utilitarian objectives had created an unhealthy learning environment. As a result, bad habits were emerging among the students. Some schools took a *laissez-faire* approach, and students began insulting the teachers and neglecting the rules. Yuan believed that the time was opportune for a new learning milieu. His goals were to indoctrinate republican ideals among students and to train them for honourable life goals. Discipline must be enforced, with serious violations resulting in expulsion. Yuan pointed out the striking asymmetry between civilized education and uncivilized ignorance, and he gave full support to high-quality education. He launched a battle against the hazardous trend of liberalism and highlighted the importance of an ethical life. His attitude towards education should be viewed as a component of his state-building, for he emphasized the relationship between individual education and republican values. He argued that education was in the long-term interests of the country and must be seen as a way to enhance personal “republican qualifications” for national reconstruction.⁷³

Yuan’s favourable treatment of religions deserves attention. As soon as he assumed his provisional presidency, he declared that “people should enjoy freedom of religion. All different religions should be viewed as equal without any prejudice or discrimination. Citizens who have faith in religion or not or who believed in any religion whatsoever should respect each other in order to avoid suspicion and mistrust and to reach the goal of delightful contentment.”⁷⁴ Yuan knew that his country, which had just survived the carnage of the Boxer Uprising, which had been triggered by a religious clash, could not afford another religious conflict. The best approach was to adopt a tolerant religious policy, one enforced not through isolationism and disengagement but rather through active communication and state sanction. In particular, he tried to improve the relationship between Christianity and China’s native religions. In the spring of 1912, he received a deputation of Chinese Christian pastors and pledged to them that his government would place Christianity on an equal standing with China’s indigenous religions and Buddhism. Later on, he allowed Christians to hold a congregation inside the Temple of Heaven, which was a historic breakthrough, since it was the holy site where Chinese rulers had traditionally honoured Heaven. In 1913, Yuan’s government ordered officials to contact church leaders, entreating them to pray for Yuan as national leader. No wonder Yuan won thunderous

applause from foreign missionaries; for example, W.A.P. Martin commented enthusiastically that Yuan “favors the Holy Faith” and felt that he could be “the Constantine of a Christian China.”⁷⁵

During his provisional presidency, Yuan Shikai had often addressed economic matters and in that regard continued to promote China’s economic modernization. In particular, he helped promote a growing awareness of the vital role played by commerce and its potential benefits to the nation. He remarked that the republic must develop industries.⁷⁶ He acknowledged that Chinese industry had fallen too far behind, largely because China had always been an agrarian nation. Yet below the soil, there were rich mineral deposits to exploit. He said that “citizens should not pursue livelihood from opening more tillage, but need always seek what’s beneath their feet.”⁷⁷ To develop industries, Yuan encouraged the founding of more professional schools, promoted economic freedom, and urged the abandonment of the outdated notion that only agriculture was important.⁷⁸ He accepted Zhang Jian’s progressive ideas about industry, agriculture, finance, and other economic activities. Scholars have acknowledged that Yuan’s promotion of industrial and commercial growth led to economic expansion.⁷⁹ That the 1910s and 1920s were a golden age of rapid growth for the Chinese economy cannot be totally severed from Yuan’s economic policies.⁸⁰ In the past, scholars attributed that growth to lax pressure from the imperialist powers during the First World War; today, more scholars concur that Yuan’s support of industry played a role and should be acknowledged as well.⁸¹

Yuan chiselled an image of himself as being in the vanguard of the struggle against opium addiction. The 1911 Revolution had brought the empire to a shuddering halt, but it had not ended opium-smoking or the opium trade, which had existed for a century. As violence and turmoil erupted throughout the land during and after the revolution, popular attention to the opium issue plummeted, and opium traders saw this as a lucrative opportunity to promote sales. This problem did not elude Yuan’s eyes, and he issued executive orders to ban the sale of opium. He articulated that “the poison of opium is so caustic that it harms people’s nerves, deprives people of healthy lives, and ultimately erodes the well-being of the entire nation.”⁸² He proposed national action against the importation, cultivation, and consumption of opium and demonstrated his commitment to an opium ban extending to the global community.⁸³ He promoted this mission among his fellow citizens and linked it to patriotism.⁸⁴ He worked with British diplomats and endeavoured to implement a Sino-British anti-opium agreement.

He also worked with other countries to ban inflows of opium.⁸⁵ He commanded that “opium smokers must immediately give it up and opium traders must stop their business.” He recommended a program to terminate opium cultivation, sale, and consumption. Violations would be punished severely, and officials who tolerated the opium trade would be penalized without mercy.⁸⁶

It is worthwhile examining Yuan’s response to foreign influence on the young republic. His attitude towards the unequal treaty system, a legacy of the Qing, was one aspect of this. After the Opium War the Qing government had signed hundreds of unequal treaties that allowed the imperialist powers to encroach on Chinese territories. Now the Chinese enthusiastically called for the return of lost national privileges. Yuan, however, advised his fellow countrymen that they should cautiously respect all of these treaties. He based his reasoning on this stance: all the international treaties were based on trust and should not be breached unilaterally; the powers had recently declared their support for the Chinese republic, which ultimately would have long-term benefits; and more importantly, China should not act rashly while the current national situation remained unstable. He advised his fellow Chinese to remember that they “are walking on thin ice and on the edge of a steep cliff” and that the country still faced a number of dangers. So they should abide by the treaties, for “any violations will bring disgraceful distrust and usher the country onto a dangerous path.”⁸⁷ Yuan was clear-eyed about the global situation and often accepted the advice of his foreign advisers regarding China’s ties with other nations. In May 1913, he tried to recruit Theodore Roosevelt, the former US president, as his political adviser, because of Roosevelt’s political expertise and lofty reputation.⁸⁸ He declined the invitation.

CONCLUSION

Yuan Shikai burst into the post-revolutionary political arena as the new national leader. As an official of the former imperial regime, he did not understand the true meaning of a republic and had little grasp of democratic values. Yet he would play a vital role in the founding of the new republic and guarantee the nation’s transition to it. For better or worse, for the majority of Chinese at this crossroads, he was the personification of the republic, given that they did not grasp the connotations of democracy either. The republic, after all, was a Western import and “lacked an

intellectual ancestry and a pre-natal pregnancy,” as William Elliot Griffis remarked a century ago. Like Griffis, most Chinese in post-imperial China viewed Yuan as “possibly the best one to serve as a stepping stone to higher things.”⁸⁹ Yuan and most of his compatriots shared a vision of social stability and economic prosperity, and he was determined to strive for both. To that end, he weakened the role of premier, schemed to balance opposing groups, suppressed possible challengers, and quashed potential rivals. He strengthened his power to control Congress but without allowing the Beiyang Clique to transform itself into a political party. Had he allowed the Beiyang Clique to become a political party, the nation might have taken a completely different course. The laws passed by Congress might not have been rejected by his powerful clique, and a new type of partisan politics might have taken shape.⁹⁰ Some blame a defective political design for this issue; however, it is fair to argue that Yuan’s centralism rendered the fledgling democracy dysfunctional by making it impossible for any political group to work with him for long.

From the very beginning, Yuan had no intention of accomplishing what Sun Yat-sen had hoped for this first democratic experiment. At a time when the country was troubled in multiple ways, Yuan cemented a temporary alliance with the Constitutionalists to deal with the Nationalists. The assassination of Song Jiaoren ended Yuan’s lukewarm working relationship with Sun Yat-sen, who responded by igniting a new revolution. Sun accused Yuan of arranging Song’s death, though no evidence has come to light to prove his involvement. The Song assassination was a watershed event in the political history of the republic; after it, Sun returned to violent revolution and Yuan reinstated an overbearing centralism. The Second Revolution was a national tragedy, for after it ended Yuan began to drift towards absolutism and Sun took up arms again. Strangely enough, this first republican civil war drew many Chinese to Yuan’s side; it seems that he had an excellent rapport with the majority of the Chinese people. By now the last restraints on his power had been removed. Once Sun went into exile, Yuan continued to accumulate authoritative powers – he was soon to become a dictator.

For a long time, Yuan was mistreated by historians who neglected his progressive policies, which are only now returning to light in the archives. The more recent historical perspective suggests that his policies helped stabilize the new republic, pacified the post-revolutionary situation, and fostered national economic development. Some of his measures were continuous with those under the Qing, but he also carried out reforms, many of which were intended to satisfy the new needs of the young republic.

One hundred years later, it is hard for us to assess the overall impact of his policies, for the rump republic did not allow him to fully implement them. That said, their long-term impact was dramatic. In particular, his economic policies greatly reshaped the Chinese economy, and as a result the 1910s and 1920s can be seen as a golden age during which the Chinese marched towards industrialization. For this reason, Zhang Huateng refuses to support the previous notion that Yuan's was a feudal regime, instead arguing that his administration should be regarded as bourgeois.⁹¹

II

President

Yuan Shikai served as president from October 10, 1913, to January 1, 1916, a period that saw his political power reach its apex and his image in history reach its nadir. For much of the twentieth century, he was viewed as a monster – as an archetypical evil dictator,¹ decried as “a saboteur of republicanism and a traitor to the republic.”² Almost all scholars before the 1980s condemned him for concentrating political power in his own hands and for silencing political rivals. In the West, scholars echoed this verdict, adopting terms like “dictatorship” to describe his presidency.³ Jerome Chen employs the word “strongman” when discussing Yuan as president, and T.K. Tong uses “oligarchy” to describe his absolutist rule. Recently, R. Keith Schoppa, while remaining neutral himself, has cited other interpretations regarding Yuan’s “dictatorship.”⁴ The common denominator in all cases is that Yuan was an anti-revolutionary autocrat who nipped a young democracy in the bud through his centralizing manoeuvres.

Even worse, Yuan’s presidency was viewed as a dictatorship borne from treason. For scholars of revolutionary times, Yuan was a national traitor. The definitive judgment of many was that he sold out China’s national interests to foreign powers for his personal gain. In particular, they often pointed to his signing of Japan’s Twenty-One Demands in 1915 as evidence of his treasonous crimes, as a dirty deal signed in exchange for imperial Japan’s endorsement of his monarchical ambitions.⁵ More strangely, the Chinese have embraced this perception without considering what led to his signing of the demands and without surveying his

diplomatic efforts to hold back Japanese aggression. Only recently have scholars begun to probe the complicated circumstances and offer a fairer and more objective assessment of his dealings with Japan.

Also, revolutionary scholars largely neglected Yuan's progressive reforms. Without mentioning his modernization initiatives, in a single voice they decried his time in power as a treacherous dictatorship, and their venom against him had a nationwide impact. Their judgment was not based on a comprehensive review; indeed, it amounted to a deliberate misconstruction and emotional abuse of history. This shut down serious efforts to examine his progressive reforms for the sake of satisfying readers who had been indoctrinated to view revolution as the natural or even inevitable outcome of history. In the new century, historians should avoid biased analysis and aim at balanced and comprehensive interpretation. Needless to say, Yuan must be held accountable for his actions and must be condemned for his wrongdoings. That said, the new century's historiography should not be bound tightly to political convictions and simplistic appraisals; by setting aside our biases and maximizing our objectivity, we ought to be able to fairly and thoroughly assess Yuan's page of history.

ESTABLISHING DICTATORIAL CENTRALISM

Yuan Shikai followed the basic principles established in the Provisional Constitution during his provisional presidency, although he collided strongly with the Nationalist Party both in and outside Congress. He was aware of the immense political implications of that document, and he acted so as not to shirk his obligations and refrained from extreme actions. He understood that a formal election for president would be held in Congress. After crushing the Second Revolution by September, he manoeuvred Congress into passing the Presidential Election Law on October 5, 1913. Congress held the election in both houses a day later, on October 6, 1913. The traditional view holds that Yuan resorted to coercion during this election – that he sent a “citizen corps” to besiege Congress, harass legislators, and threaten them into voting for him. No evidence has yet been found that Yuan himself sent those crowds to harass the congressmen, but this is not to deny that his henchmen did do so. The election did not go smoothly; legislators cast their ballots three times on that day. In the first round, Yuan received 471 ballots, in the second, 497. Neither tally was enough. The third round was held after sunset, and the congressmen cast their final votes while suffering from hunger and exhaustion. This

time, Yuan received just enough votes – 507 – to become president.⁶ Clearly, there were clashing political interests within Congress, and Yuan was a controversial figure there.

Yuan's inauguration on October 10, 1913, displayed his disdain for his political rivals. He refused to take the oath in Congress, instead holding the ceremony in the former Imperial Palace. For the ceremony he wore a marshal's uniform rather than a chief administrator's robes. He sat on the emperor's throne to receive the best wishes from officials. In the morning, he delivered his presidential address, in which he called for social stability, rule of law, educational advancement, scientific and economic development, and a moral citizenry. He promised to honour all the treaties that China had signed with the major powers. He condemned Sun Yat-sen without mentioning his name, labelling his followers "a handful of mobsters" (*shaoshubao*). He warned people of the danger of further action by those "mobs." He ordered the military to be loyal to the state. He promised he would carry out his duties faithfully.⁷ In the afternoon, he stood on the Tiananmen Rostrum while more than twenty thousand troops marched past in a grand procession. With that, he passed into the pages of history as the first president of the Republic of China.

Yuan's problems with Congress had not ended – his dreams of hegemonic executive power were checked by the lawmakers. As Yuan understood it, the three branches of government – the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary – should operate amicably without interference, and without one trying to dominate the others.⁸ In his view, the executive power was being strongly curbed by a handful of congressmen: his official appointments were being rejected, his economic plans quashed, and his executive decisions overturned. Even worse, the courts' verdicts were often ignored by congressmen. He slammed Congress as a hotbed of friction and conflict. Because it did not cooperate with him, he perceived it as a malicious influence. He accused it of trying to turn the executive branch into an appendage of Congress. He angrily charged that "Congress not only became a congressional tyrant, but also turned out to be a congressional monarch, because it regards all ministers and executive heads as its slaves."⁹ He cited the American and French presidencies as examples to support his vision of a strong presidency in China.¹⁰

For Yuan, the problem with Congress was that the Nationalist Party held the majority in it. Sun Yat-sen had been defeated during the Second Revolution, yet Nationalist congressmen who repudiated Sun continued to be the dominant force within Congress, and seldom did they act in accord with Yuan's centralism. They presented a strong opposition,

having cast themselves in the role of challengers to Yuan's expanding power. As soon as he assumed the presidency, Nationalist congressmen began drafting a new constitution that would limit presidential power. Inevitably, the clash escalated. Yuan mobilized executive administrators to launch a propaganda war against the Nationalist-controlled Congress; at the same time, he began laying plans to outlaw the Nationalist Party. On November 4, 1913, he issued three orders to Nationalist congressmen, the Nationalist Party, and the entire country: all Nationalist congressmen were to be expelled from the legislature; all Nationalist organizations were to be disbanded; and the Nationalist Party itself was to be outlawed. He justified these moves as necessary to save the nation and rescue the people. He tarred the Nationalists as a rebellious party (*luandang*),¹¹ condemned it for misleading China's youth,¹² and censured it for using Congress to foment chaos.¹³

Needless to say, Yuan's assault on the opposition party would have been a flagrant move in *any* democracy. Yet he did not stop with these measures, instead continuing his efforts to further concentrate his power. On January 10, 1914, he declared Congress dissolved, for the following reasons: it lacked a legitimate quorum due to the expulsion of Nationalist legislators; it was not effectively organized; it was not operating efficiently or achieving much; and it was deliberately fostering nationwide chaos. So he ordered that each congressman be allocated \$400 for travel expenses, and sent them home. He also ordered the suspension of all provincial assemblies and local autonomous organs. By then, he had abandoned the representative system he had championed for decades. Nevertheless, he promised that his agenda would include a new Congress, which he referred to as the Best Congress (*zuiliangguohui*).¹⁴ Unfortunately, by the time of his death, Yuan had still not convened such a Congress. What people saw, then, was constant efforts on his part to establish a centralized government in which he was all-powerful.

Without an opposition party and without a Congress, Yuan moved towards what many scholars termed a "dictatorship." Yet he had to seek legitimacy, and to that end, in late 1913 he advanced the idea of creating the Political Council (*Zhengzhihuiyi*) as window dressing for a representative system. The council consisted of nearly seventy members, two from each province, some from ethnic regions, and others appointed by him. He named Li Jingxi its chairman. He hoped that "the council could guide the people into the right orbit of republicanism and reach the goal of national salvation."¹⁵ This council was only an advisory body.¹⁶ It was through a decision of this council that Yuan took action to dissolve

Congress. After that, the council continued to cooperate with Yuan to strengthen his presidency. On January 26, 1914, it convened a Constitution Drafting Conference (*Yuefahuiyi*) with sixty representatives from the provinces, ethnic regions, and governmental organs to draft a new constitution. According to the rules, all representatives were to be elected through an electorate body, and the final decision was to be announced by Yuan.¹⁷

The Constitution Drafting Conference was convened on March 18, 1914, at which a letter of congratulations from Yuan was read. In it, he argued that the Provisional Constitution did not meet the needs of the state, for it imposed restraints on the government and allowed no freedom to the executive branch even during a potential emergency.¹⁸ After more than a month of deliberations, the conference drafted the Constitution of the Republic of China (*Zhonghuaminguoyuefa*), which Yuan proclaimed in effect on May 1, 1914. In his proclamation, Yuan justified the new changes.¹⁹ The new constitution, first and foremost, gave Yuan the paramount power as well as the leeway to exercise his executive authority. He would no longer be the titular head of state. Instead he would have the right to convene and shut down the legislature. He could declare wars and conclude peace. He could be impeached only if three-quarters of the legislators voted to do so, which was wildly unlikely. The Political Participation Council would be a consultative body. Citizens were to be regarded as equal and their freedom was guaranteed, yet their liberty would be confined “within the limits of laws.”²⁰ In practice, this new constitution offered Yuan so much power that his presidency should be ranked as one of the most powerful in twentieth-century China.

Yuan also abolished many Republican organs and created new ones. The structural changes were made to end all checks on presidential authority. As he recast the government, he erected a hierarchical framework with himself at the top. No clear lines were drawn between the executive, judicial, and legislative branches; instead he had the power to control all three. There would be a legislature (*Lifayuan*), but its members would be appointed by Yuan, who could also dissolve it. There would be a Political Participation Council (*Canzhengyuan*), but its members would be appointed by him. Regarding administration, Yuan abolished the cabinet and established the Board of Political Affairs (*Zhengshitang*), with his close friend Xu Shichang as its head with the title of Secretary of State (*guowuqing*). Xu’s task was to carry out Yuan’s policies and handle administrative routines. Below Xu, the ministers of the various departments would follow Yuan’s orders. To build an efficient, well-organized,

and corruption-free administration, Yuan created two new organs: the Political Correction Board (*Pingzhengyuan*) and the Political Supervision Board (*Suzhengting*), to discipline, admonish, and penalize officials. The first board was to hear cases against corrupt officials; the second was to supervise officials and bring legal proceedings against corrupt administrators.²¹

Yuan had built his formidable power on the new constitution's foundation, yet he did not forget the importance of the military. He saw Duan Qirui's expanding military power as a threat and took actions to constrain him by having him serve as minister of the Department of the Army and as chairman of the Board of Generals (*Jiangjunfu*). To restrict him, Yuan established the Commanding Office of the Marshalls of Army and Navy (*Luhaijundayuanshuaibanshichu*), with Yuan in charge and others sharing military power with Duan. To counterbalance Duan, Yuan also established the Model Regiment (*Mofantuan*) as a military college for training officers who would forge ties with Yuan. His goal was to indoctrinate officers in a special program, with each term (five in total) lasting for half a year. His intention was to build an obedient army, using this regiment as a tool. He paid its officers well and promoted some to higher ranks. He even requested that they pledge to obey his orders.²² His moves led to further friction between himself and Duan. Soon after, he persuaded Duan to retire from his positions.²³

Yuan's presidency was further strengthened by the promulgation of the Law of Presidential Election (*Dazongtongxuanjufa*) on December 29, 1914, which not only set the presidential term at ten years but also allowed the incumbent president to continue to serve. This is often interpreted as a lifetime presidency. Although there were rules for election, the election committee consisted of one hundred men: fifty from the Political Participation Council and fifty from the legislature. The legal quorum was three-quarters of all voters, and anyone who won two-thirds of the vote would be elected. This seems reasonable, but the problem was that Yuan had the right to appoint all those members beforehand. More importantly, according to the law, Yuan as the incumbent president could recommend three candidates for the election. As for the three candidates, Yuan incorporated the former imperial succession method by placing three names in a golden box and storing it in a stone-walled room inside the Presidential Palace. Three different keys to open the box would be kept in the hands of the president, the chairman of the Political Participation Council, and the Secretary of State.²⁴ As determined after Yuan's death, the three names Yuan placed inside the box were Li Yuanhong,

Duan Qirui, and Xu Shichang;²⁵ but many at the time suspected that the original three names were of Yuan's three sons, which would have meant that Yuan intended to turn his presidency into a hereditary system.²⁶

Yuan realized that the president was encumbered with too much responsibility as a result of power concentration, yet he continued to justify his centralism. He saw the earlier confrontation between the president and Congress as a drawback, for it interfered with people's lives and threatened public safety. He argued that he had been compelled to take a centralist approach in order to save the nation. The cabinet and Congress would be restored once constitutional rule had been established. Yuan offered a vivid description of the centralist presidency and future constitutional rule:

Today's president carries the burden of eighty catties while the secretary of state only holds a load of twenty catties. When constitutional rule is reached, another twenty catties would be added to the cabinet and gradually two additional loads of twenty catties each will be shifted until the cabinet carries eighty catties while [the] president will have only twenty catties. By then, the ideal constitutional state will be successfully established.²⁷

During the transition, which was of undetermined length, it would be the president's task to build a centralist state that would guarantee people's welfare and national security.

Scholars have long used the word "dictatorship" to describe Yuan's presidency, deeming his moves tyrannical. However, it is somewhat inaccurate to employ Western terminology – *tyranny*, *dictatorship*, *despotism*, *absolutism*, *autocracy*, *totalitarianism* – when depicting Yuan's regime. It is true that it tended to be repressive after the Second Revolution, but that repressiveness faded as time passed, although he remained vigilant against Sun Yat-sen. Freedom of the press made it possible for newspapers to publish relevant news and editorials. Religious activities continued unhindered. Foreign missionaries freely promoted Western culture. Economic liberalism was encouraged. Social life fell outside Yuan's purview. The Nationalist Party had been outlawed, but other political parties still operated, although no Congress housed them and there was no congressional debate. In terms of political control over regions, Yuan's power never fully penetrated the southern provinces. Even in the north, some provinces were beyond Yuan's management. For example, Yan Xishan was in charge of Shanxi. Yuan dispatched his operatives there but could not directly control the province.²⁸ His power relied on the military, and his

prohibition of military involvement in political affairs prevented the Beiyang Clique from turning into a political party. His power tended to be restricted. At most, his regime could be defined as dictatorial centralism.

DIPLOMATIC CRISIS

As Yuan concentrated power, he also had to navigate foreign affairs. He knew he had to find strategies to deal with the major powers and to protect China's national interests. From the very beginning of his presidency, he managed thorny issues and unexpected emergencies. He did not fashion a systematic foreign policy, although he did establish a number of objectives. First of all, he rejected closed-minded isolationism and promoted active engagement in global issues.²⁹ He wanted to pursue close relations with other nations and warm ties with foreign governments. By facilitating international cooperation, he hoped to boost China's economic growth.³⁰ To reveal his goodwill to other powers, he reiterated his intention to fulfill China's treaty obligations. All privileges, precedents, and special amendments would be faithfully respected.³¹ He believed he needed to reach out to foreign diplomats and build personal networks with them. His efforts in foreign affairs were intended to create an advantageous situation and win a relatively secure milieu for China's national growth.

Yuan also had to deal with internal affairs by diplomatic means. Outer Mongolia presented such a case. In his view, the republic had inherited the entire Qing Empire, within which all people now were citizens of the republic. Accordingly, China's five main ethnic groups should live together peacefully as equal citizens of the republic. This notion was challenged by the Mongol nobles, who intended to build a separate state. Yuan was aware of their plan and endeavoured to persuade them to respect the republic's territorial boundaries. When his calls were rejected and when Outer Mongolia sent troops to invade Inner Mongolia, he dispatched troops to repel them. After this military action, Yuan continued to promote reconciliation among local Han and Mongol residents. At the same time, he warned that any disturbances would be harshly suppressed.³² In addition, he allowed Mongol nobles to retain their traditional privileges and allowed them their traditional hereditary rights; indeed, he offered them new entitlements.³³ At the same time, he established the Mongol-Tibetan Administration (*Mengzangyuan*) to address related ethnic issues.³⁴

Russian intervention made the issue of Outer Mongolia more complicated, for it worked against Yuan's vision of a Chinese-controlled frontier region. He knew that there were competing forces in Outer Mongolia; even so, he firmly claimed the region as an inseparable part of China. Unfortunately, the Mongol nobles had a very different goal – they intended to establish a theocratic authority that would encompass self-rule, religious freedom, and administrative independence. The Russian Empire was a contesting force whose goal was to turn the region into a Russian dependency so as to safeguard Russian interests. The Russians planned to entice Outer Mongolia into seceding from China; however, the situation was fraught, and thus Russia adopted a “neutral” stance, while encouraging the Mongol nobles to seek “autonomy,” after which Outer Mongolia would gradually slide into the Russian orbit. Sudden independence might not be in Russia's national interest, for the independence-minded Mongol nobles might then challenge Russian hegemony as well. The Russians believed that “autonomy” could go far to maximize Russian interests and ensure Russian dominance over the region.³⁵

The three contending forces had engaged in hostile exchanges of documents, diplomatic notes, and private correspondence, all of which generated national indignation. In Yuan's view, China's overarching concern was to claim Outer Mongolia as a part of China. The Mongol nobles were not easily swayed to China's side, and the Russians too were taking a strong stand. The three sides finally held an international conference at Kyakhta, Russia, to negotiate the Outer Mongolia issue. The Kyakhta Conference lasted for nine months, so clearly, the negotiations were intense. Yuan's representatives, Bi Guifang and Chen Lu, followed Yuan's instructions on China's behalf. According to Chinese scholars' recent studies, Yuan was the real negotiator, controlling the haggling from a distance. From September 8, 1914, to June 7, 1915, forty-eight formal talks were held. After tenacious bargaining, an agreement was finally signed on June 7, 1915, which was hailed by some Chinese as a positive breakthrough, for it affirmed that Outer Mongolia was part of China. Thus Yuan had “restored” China's territorial sovereignty. Other Chinese, however, regarded the agreement as a humiliation, because China had granted Outer Mongolia autonomy and would be allowed to station only a few hundred guards to protect a commissioner, even though it would be allowed to offer titles to Mongol nobles.³⁶

The Tibetan issue was similar but evolved differently, since the dominant power in the mix was Britain. That nation had a long history of penetrating Tibet, and Britain and China had signed treaties according

to which Britain did not deny China's suzerainty. The use of that term meant that Britain did not recognize China's full control, although the Chinese government saw Tibet as an inseparable part of China. When the Qing Empire collapsed in 1912, Tibet declared independence, which was denied by Yuan's government. In late 1912, Yuan dispatched an expeditionary force to Tibet led by Yin Changheng; its advance was halted by British intervention. For Yuan, bilateral ties were important but territorial sovereignty was more so. Sovereignty and territorial integrity were the centrepieces of Yuan's Tibet policy; all other issues were negotiable, including high-level autonomy so as to facilitate a rapport with Tibetan elites. To win over those elites, Yuan declared equal status for Tibetans in the republic, and therefore Tibetan representatives would be part of major national organs. He ordered officials and frontier soldiers to deal moderately with Tibetans and to recognize the religious leadership of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama.³⁷ He later ordered the execution of Zhong Ying, the military commander in Tibet, for failing to quell mutiny, accepting bribes, and harassing the local people.³⁸

The Chinese government held a conference with Britain, known as the Simla Conference, between October 13, 1913, and July 3, 1914, in Simla, India, to which Yuan dispatched Chen Yifan as his envoy. At the conference, Britain proposed that Tibet be divided into Outer Tibet and Inner Tibet, just as Russia had divided Mongolia. Inner Tibet would be under Chinese administration; Outer Tibet, with Lhasa as the capital, would enjoy autonomy, and China would not station troops there or impose an administration. Instead, China would send a representative along with a small number of bodyguards. In this way, Britain recognized China's suzerainty. Chen Yifan signed the original draft but also pointed out that any formal treaty would have to be ratified and signed by the Chinese central government before it came into effect.³⁹ For Yuan, the partition of Outer and Inner Tibet was unjustified. He insisted that Tibet was part of China and that negotiations over sovereignty were not acceptable. He ordered Chen to refuse to sign the formal agreement; today that order is seen as a clear defence of national territorial sovereignty.⁴⁰

Many scholars have argued that the outbreak of the First World War provided a respite for China, in that it took Western pressure off the country. In fact, the international situation was more complicated than that. Japan took the opportunity to press China for privileges, and the war impacted China in other ways as well. It is true that Yuan declared Chinese neutrality when the war started. He regretted that the belligerent countries, all friendly to China, had launched such a ferocious war. He

hoped that Chinese nationals in Europe and in European colonies would not be impacted.⁴¹ On August 6, 1914, Yuan's government formally proclaimed neutrality, prohibited the belligerent nations from using Chinese soil for military purposes, and forbade Chinese nationals from aiding the fighting nations. He requested that the belligerent nations respect local Chinese residents, refrain from confiscating their property, and not force them to be soldiers.⁴² Yuan cared about the well-being of his fellow Chinese, as the following incident verifies. As soon as the war started, a large number of Chinese coolies in Southeast Asia were forced to return home, and many of them landed in Xiamen, Fujian Province. Seeing that many had lost their possessions and become homeless, Yuan allocated \$30,000 to help these repatriates to resettle.⁴³

No controversy posed a more excruciating headache for Yuan than Japan's Twenty-One Demands of 1915. Traditional historiography claims that Japan took advantage of the First World War to press China for imperialist gains and that Yuan accepted those demands in exchange for Japan's support for his monarchical project. Accordingly, Yuan's acceptance was an act of treason, and his negotiation with Japan was a "dirty deal."⁴⁴ Indeed, the Japanese government did seize the opportunity presented by the partial withdrawal of Western imperialist powers to establish a position for itself in China at the expense of China's national interests. But claims that Yuan reached a dirty deal are groundless. According to scholars' recent research, that claim originated in Sun Yat-sen's political propaganda, which soon became accepted as the "ironclad truth."⁴⁵ Scholars today understand that the assertion is far from reality and that Japan's demands had nothing to do with Yuan's monarchical project.⁴⁶ In fact, Yuan was furious when he received the demands from Japanese minister Eki Hioki on January 18, 1915. According to US minister Paul Reinsch, the demands came as a heavy blow to Yuan, who was stunned speechless for a while.⁴⁷

Japan's original demands fell into five main groups and were full of arbitrary assertions and crammed with intolerable requests. The first group required China to acknowledge Japan's right to inherit all former German interests in Qingdao, Shandong, which had been occupied by Japan in August 1914. The second group demanded that China offer privileges to Japan in South Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. The third group declared that the Han-Ye-Ping Company was to become a Japan-China joint venture. The fourth group stipulated that China's coastal regions and islands must not be ceded or leased to a third country without Japan's consent. The fifth group, characterized by Immanuel Hsu as "the most

sinister of all,” demanded that China hire Japanese political, financial, military, and police advisers, which would result in Japanese dominance over the Chinese government.⁴⁸ Although the demands opened with flowery phrases calling for amity, friendship, and peace, China could not live in restful tranquility and honourable dignity if they were fully implemented. By Yuan’s understanding, if China met Japan’s demands it would be reduced to a Japanese protectorate or a colony, just like Korea. On the surface, Japan would shoulder the burden of leading China towards modernization, but in reality, as Yuan remarked, “our country would no longer be a country and our people would be slaves.” Yuan knew that China on its own could not fight a war against its powerful neighbour, for Japan was now the most powerful country in East Asia.⁴⁹

Confronted with Japan’s arm-twisting, Yuan Shikai adopted a few strategies to counterbalance the situation. First, he delayed his response by replacing foreign minister Sun Baoqi with Lu Zhengxiang, whose slow yet polite manner often infuriated the Japanese. Lu often spent an hour or more in courtesies such as tea-drinking before talking about business.⁵⁰ Between January and May, the two sides held twenty-four meetings to discuss the demands. Second, Yuan defied Japan’s requests to keep the demands confidential and instead released them to the media, which spurred nationwide protests. By applying the people’s anti-Japanese sentiment as leverage, he hoped to place pressure on Japan and reduce the risk to China. Third, Yuan tried to persuade foreigners to press Japan to constrain itself. He sent his Japanese adviser Ariga Nagao back to Japan to feel out the reaction of the *genro* (i.e., the elder statesmen who advised the Japanese emperor). The *genro*’s moderate attitude indeed placed pressure on the Japanese government. Yuan strived to establish a dialogue with Western diplomats for the purpose of pressuring their governments to help confine Japan. The US government was noncommittal; the British government expressed distrust of Japan’s aggression. They did not want to see the Open Door policy enfeebled, and they also did not want to see China drawn into the Japanese orbit.⁵¹

In the end, Yuan’s most important strategy involved efforts to change the demands. The primary sources indicate that Yuan read every version of the demands, including the revisions, and offered detailed comments. He issued orders to his staff during the negotiations. Regarding important items, he suggested conducting further talks. Regarding those items that would harm China’s sovereignty, he pointed out that “these items interfere with China’s internal politics and infringe on our national

sovereignty. It is hard to agree.” Regarding economic demands, he commented that “these demands are too broad and cannot be enforced.”⁵² Regarding Japan’s demand that China not lease islands or coastal regions to a third country, Yuan changed the words “a third country” (*taguo*) to “foreign countries” (*waiguo*). This one-character modification was significant in defending China’s national interests, for it meant that China would not allow *any* country, including Japan, to lease or rent Chinese islands or coastal regions.⁵³ His revision showed that he was trying to ameliorate a disastrous situation and to prevent the loss of national interests. After Yuan’s revisions and more than twenty rounds of negotiations, the final version of the demands was a completely different one.

Yuan acted cautiously during the negotiations. He did not want to create an excuse for Japan to act more aggressively, but he continued to instruct his foreign staff to defend national interests. He utilized Chinese nationalism to place pressure on Japan, but he did not want the mass demonstrations to fly out of control. With respect to internal repercussions, Yuan wanted to avoid inflaming the people through provocative actions, and to that end he ordered people not to listen to rumours, not to take extreme action such as boycotting Japanese goods, and not to create new misunderstandings.⁵⁴ Any extreme action would bring more troubles down on China as a nation.⁵⁵ In the negotiations, Yuan wanted to defend China’s interests as much as possible without relinquishing sovereignty. He hoped the negotiations would continue, for a breakdown in them might trigger Japanese belligerence, with disastrous consequences.

Japanese patience was not boundless. On May 7, 1915, while Yuan continued to procrastinate, Japanese minister Eki Hioki issued an ultimatum, insisting that he accept the demands within forty-eight hours and warning him of serious consequences if he did not. Two days later, Yuan’s government offered acceptance. After months of tenacious diplomacy with a much more powerful neighbour, the final version of the demands was totally different from the original. The fifth group of demands had been dropped, and many other items were now less harsh. Nevertheless, Yuan knew that his acceptance was a humiliation to his country. At the Supreme State Council meeting on May 8, 1915, Yuan told his officials it was a shameful and heartbreaking agony to accept the demands, but China had to do so because of her weakness. He advised his officials to work diligently for a decade to catch up with Japan in order to change the situation.⁵⁶ On May 14, 1915, Yuan issued a secret notice to high-ranking officials throughout the country to expose Japan’s ambitions and China’s debility, urging them to bear in mind the extreme pain (*qitong*) of the

humiliation and advising them to labour hard for a bright national future and to avoid the collapse of the state and the extinction of the nation (*wangguomiezhong*).⁵⁷

MANAGING DOMESTIC ISSUES

For a long time, Yuan's management of domestic affairs during his presidency was deliberately neglected. There were many reasons for this, the main one being the focus on his dictatorial centralism and his acceptance of humiliating treaties. As his wickedness was magnified, mention of his progressive policies became taboo. And when those policies *were* mentioned, they were treated as examples of his scheming hypocrisy and as unworthy of scholarly inquiry. In fact, it is worth examining *all* of his policies in order to reveal the panorama of his presidency. A close examination reveals that his presidency differed from his provisional presidency. After he had severed his relationship with the Nationalist Party and demolished Congress, he continued to enforce his progressive policies; indeed, he launched a number of new projects of expanding scope and range. He intended to consolidate centralist authority and strengthen the national economy with the goal of achieving a stable yet peaceful society.

Yuan viewed corruption as one important factor (among many) in the collapse of the Qing, and he was determined to build an efficient bureaucracy stocked with professional, knowledgeable, and talented administrators. He cherished talent, and he sought to staff his administration with talented officials. On September 17, 1914, he decreed that those who had been trained overseas should be given priority in employment.⁵⁸ At the same time, mediocre officials were to be dismissed.⁵⁹ He ordered the development of a system to supervise officials' performances, and to that end, the provinces reported officials' performances every three months to the central government and counties reported officials' performances every month to the provincial government.⁶⁰ He ordered provincial governors to take care of the people, instead of tormenting them during their inspection tours by taking provisions from the locals or bringing escorts who only added to the burden facing local people.⁶¹ He ordered low-level administrators to hang traditional political slogans in their offices as stern warnings.⁶² In March 1915, he issued an order admonishing officials about the "four avoidances" – laziness, nepotism, luxuries, and gambling.⁶³ He set an efficient and

corruption-free administration as his target, and he quickly punished violators. He condemned corrupt officials as destroyers of the country and allowed the government to use the traditional administrative code (*jiulu*) to penalize them – in extreme cases, that included capital punishment.⁶⁴ In Xinjiang, county magistrate Liao Yan, who had harassed the local people by collecting extra taxes for his own benefit, was executed.⁶⁵ The mayor of Beijing, Wang Zhixin, a subordinate of Yuan for years, was accused of corruption. After careful investigation, Yuan declared that Wang's "corruption is worse than the actions of robbers." On his order, Wang was executed.⁶⁶

According to Yuan Shikai, the most important administrators of all were the county magistrates (*xianzhishi*), because they governed the lowest level of the bureaucracy and were posited between the state and the majority of the Chinese people; over 90 percent of the population lived under their direct care. Yuan stated that "the way of pacifying the people lies in the supervision of officials, and magistrates at the county level especially should be viewed as the essential element."⁶⁷ He saw county magistrates as the officials closest to the people (*qinmin'guan*),⁶⁸ and he advised them to love the people as their own children, to take care of them, to promote social order, and to foster economic advancement. He required county magistrates to be honest, cautious, and diligent.⁶⁹ He admonished them to act prudently, to arrest bad elements and protect the people (*chubao'anliang*), to offer justice so as to avoid grievances, and to cultivate a decent life for the people.⁷⁰ On December 31, 1913, Yuan issued two orders to reward efficient magistrates and to punish unproductive ones. Rewards included honourable positions, medals, promotions, salary increases, and other considerations. Penalties included dismissal, demotion, a salary cut, and more.⁷¹ Believing that county magistrates could trigger a breakdown of the entire system, Yuan imposed stiff penalties on violators. Between 1914 and 1916, Yuan's government punished 470 officials, 431 of them county magistrates, for corruption, negligence, mismanagement, and other infractions. The penalties can be broken down as follows: demotion (6.3 percent), dismissal (42.9 percent), a salary cut (21.2 percent), a demerit on the record (4.4 percent), no penalty (3.2 percent), case closure (1.4 percent), criminal penalty (8.8 percent), and cases of no special record (11.8 percent).⁷²

To ensure an efficient bureaucracy, Yuan proclaimed a new official ranking system on July 28, 1914, in which he separated individual officials' standings into two categories: first was the title matching one's position in the government, and the second was the rank displaying one's

accomplishments. The separation between title and rank, according to Yuan, could prevent existing abuses of honours, stimulate officials to be innovative, and prevent ambitious but incompetent individuals from reaping profits. He argued that the military had enforced this same separation, and it should now be followed by the non-military administration.⁷³ According to Yuan's design, civilian officials would be partitioned into nine ranks among three groups (*qing*, *dafu*, *shi*). Among the *qing* (the minister designation), there were senior, associate, and junior ranks. The same ranks were created for the other two categories. Yuan began bestowing ranks on January 1, 1915. Only Xu Shichang earned senior *qing*; Zhao Erxun, Li Jingxi, and Liang Dunyan became associate *qing*. Of course, more officials were added later to various other ranks.⁷⁴ All of these were offered in accordance with an individual's accomplishments (*jizi*) and outstanding contributions (*laoji*). Without the ranking, it would be hard for an official to be promoted. Hence title, rank, contribution, and promotion should all be integrated.⁷⁵ This ranking system seemed to restore the old system with the old titles, but it does demonstrate Yuan's stress on maximizing civilian officials' capabilities.

Yuan tried to maximize the congruence of judiciary accountability, societal order, and popular benefits. After perceiving abuses in judicial operations, such as case procrastination, partiality after bribery, light penalties for felonies, and abuse of the legal codes, Yuan set out to reform the existing judicial system.⁷⁶ He supported Liang Qichao's judicial initiatives, offered financial assistance for them, and encouraged the absorption of judicial tradition and respect for judicial heritage. He emphasized the importance of qualified judges, arguing that "the nation will suffer from chaos, if judges cannot protect people and if judges do not punish evils."⁷⁷ "The pervasive issue," he opined, "is that judges are not qualified and abuse the laws by harming people while adding burdens to them and wasting a huge amount of governmental expenditure."⁷⁸ Yuan issued detailed orders to reward and punish judges. His goal was to turn judges into competent professionals, capable of case-handling and responsive to people's requests.⁷⁹ His ultimate goal, after codifying laws, erecting courts, and hiring qualified judges, was to make the judicial system independent. He promised that "the goal of judicial independence should be forever preserved."⁸⁰ To realize the noble objective that judges maintain high professional standards and that the courts satisfy the people's need for justice, China had to work towards judicial independence.⁸¹ To that end, Yuan prohibited judges from joining political parties; this was in order to prevent self-interest, partiality, and collusion with fellow partisans.

Judges who had joined political parties were required to withdraw their membership.⁸²

Yuan Shikai was proud of the new school system he had established over the previous decade; nevertheless, he was dissatisfied with unhealthy trends and moral decline. Students were becoming disrespectful of teachers and indulging in liberal ways. Yuan worried about and promised to redress unwholesome phenomena. He remarked that “poverty is not what we should worry about; rather, education should be our only major concern, because ineffective education will lead to poverty and weakness.”⁸³ He intended to create a healthy learning milieu for youth to reach the goal of “nobody without learning, no time without learning, and no place without learning.”⁸⁴ He vowed an extreme makeover of the educational system, and towards this end he set three objectives: establish national moral standards (*gongtongdaode*), independent ability (*duli’nengli*), and soldier-like resolve (*shangwujingshen*);⁸⁵ these were formulated as great benevolence (*dade*), great intelligence (*dazhi*), and great bravery (*dayong*), and further alternatively labelled as popular ethics (*minde*), popular wisdom (*minzhi*), and popular prowess (*minli*).⁸⁶ Ironically, his rhetorical triplet was almost identical to Mao Zedong’s educational objectives of morality, intelligence, and physical wellness. While advocating universal elementary education, Yuan urged educators to train students to develop intuitive ability and independent minds, while acquiring knowledge and fostering personal growth. However, there was an overtone of traditional cultural learning when he required students to read Confucian classics. He pushed for textbooks to be revised so as to combine Chinese learning with Western learning. The shortage of teachers was an irritant, and to remedy this he encouraged the establishment of more normal schools to train teachers. All of these ideas later were packed together in his “Specially Designed Educational Outline” issued in February 1915.⁸⁷

Culturally, Yuan Shikai intended to situate China within the hybrid milieu of tradition and modernity. He ordered the honouring of Confucius and the worship of Heaven. Seeing that the change in the political system was causing chaos, social rupture, and moral degeneration, he regretted that China “has almost become a country of bandits and beasts.” He believed that conservative cultural nurturing would help restore the normal order, and for this reason he lionized Confucius.⁸⁸ He visualized Confucian principles “as the sun and the moon rotating in the sky and as the Yellow River and the Yangtze River flowing through the earth.”⁸⁹ He proposed to restore the worship of Confucius at the Literary Temple (*wenmiao*), with traditional customs and rituals.⁹⁰ On September 28,

1914, he went to the Confucian Temple in Beijing to participate in the rituals honouring Confucius; there he donated \$5,000.⁹¹ Some scholars condemned this as an anti-democratic action for the purpose of strengthening his dictatorship and nurturing absolute loyalty; more recent scholars, though, have argued that Yuan employed Confucianism to realign China's ideology, rebuild a stable society, and reinforce state-building.⁹² Yuan believed that China's traditional niche must be respected in order to revitalize the cultural dynamic that had driven national growth for more than two millennia. To restore the sanctity of Confucian tenets, Yuan aimed to affirm the validity of Confucianism, with himself as dutiful watchman.

Yuan opposed the restoration of the Qing dynasty, and in this he differed from the aged activists still loyal to the former dynasty, who published pamphlets, articles, and essays calling for the last emperor's return. Yuan remained firm in his opposition to a Qing restoration. It would not be proper to claim that Yuan was by nature supportive of the revolutionary cause; however, his refusal to accommodate the loyalists demonstrates his position that the collapse of the Qing was not regrettable and that Han rule was legitimate under the new framework of ethnic coexistence.⁹³ But at the same time, Yuan was quick to reconstruct Qing history. On March 9, 1914, he ordered the founding of the Qing History Board (*Qingshi-guan*), allocated funds to it, and hired experts, by which he carried on the long Chinese tradition of writing the history of the former dynasty. For Yuan, the Qing had "a glorious history" in terms of territorial expansion, imperial strength, and political reform.⁹⁴ He appointed Zhao Erxun as the head of this board. Yuan issued an order on September 28, 1914, supporting the collection of relevant sources. He required provincial governors to select commissioners to gather related materials, either published or unpublished, and other sources of evidence, and to submit them to the board for the writing of a Qing history.⁹⁵ To Yuan, the Qing dynasty, as a history of the past, deserved scholarly exploration. In any case, it should not be affected by current politics, in which a Qing restoration was out of the question.

To achieve political and social stability was Yuan's priority, as it was for most Chinese political leaders at that time. Noting the precarious post-imperial situation, Yuan lamented that "if this situation does not change in the long term, China will be a country replete with beasts and bandits. It will not be far from the collapse of the state and the extinction of the nation."⁹⁶ He was intent on building a stable society. He viewed the protection of foreign missionaries as a barometer of social safety in

China, and he ordered that special protection be provided to them.⁹⁷ Of course, the main focus remained the security of the local community, and in that regard he aimed at eliminating violators, strengthening the bonds between people, and giving the local people the right of self-defence. On May 20, 1914, Yuan ordered rural people to retain the Baojia system and organize a Defensive League (*baoweituan*). This involved assembling families into groups and allowing them to possess weapons; these groups were commanded to cooperate with the police to hunt down criminals and others who violated the law.⁹⁸ Perceiving that the potential for violence was high, he ordered officials to severely punish those who committed crimes. At one point he issued a directive to the governor of Henan ordering him to punish criminals, even if they were his relatives, if they ran amuck and harmed the locals.⁹⁹

Yuan's emphasis on social order coincided with his ruthless suppression of the rebellion led by Bai Lang (1873–1914), a fellow Henanese. Bai Lang, known as the “White Wolf,” a homophone on his name, launched his rebellion in October 1911, during the Wuchang Uprising. Bai was not a revolutionary but rather the leader of a traditional peasant uprising. At first, his small band did not catch Yuan's attention. But by 1913, as Bai occupied county seats, Yuan began mobilizing his troops. Confounding Yuan's expectations, Bai's band swelled into a peasant army (by one estimate, twenty thousand strong) and began applying guerrilla tactics, roaming Henan, Hubei, Anhui, Shaanxi, and Gansu provinces.¹⁰⁰ In early 1914, Yuan mobilized a large force to deal with Bai, who had by then formally established an anti-Yuan army and was spreading anti-Yuan messages. During those months, northern China was locked in an increasingly bitter struggle between the two Henanese. Yuan considered Bai an evil bandit; Bai viewed Yuan as a state thief. Yuan's twenty thousand soldiers pursued Bai for months but, much to their surprise, could not defeat him. Yuan worried that “our reputation is lost as all countries are watching. It is really a shame to our military.”¹⁰¹ Unfortunately for Bai, he had not built a strong base and became exhausted in the long run. In the end, Yuan's forces were pursuing him relentlessly. In the summer of 1914, he was defeated and killed after heavy fighting. To scholars, Bai is a controversial historical figure: many regard him as a peasant leader, while others consider him a bandit.¹⁰² Yuan saw him as a demonic outlaw who had to be crushed.¹⁰³

Yuan Shikai's pursuit of economic growth merits attention; for this he used the term “enterprise” (*shiyè*), so as to encompass economic modernization in the broadest sense, to include industry, operations,

transportation, mining, commerce, and even agricultural projects. He criticized those who only desired to be government officials; instead, he encouraged talented people to pursue a career in enterprise. He remarked: "One of the origins of China's ailing decrepitude is the fact that everyone wants to be an official. We should make official positions more difficult to obtain and enterprise careers easier to get into. In this way, talent will engage in enterprise and ultimately will save China from destitution."¹⁰⁴ To promote enterprises, Yuan's government eased administrative hurdles and encouraged the inflow of foreign capital to strengthen China's industrial sector.¹⁰⁵ Yuan once told Zhang Jian that "the enterprise policy differs from all others. The best result is not easy to achieve unless a long-term persistent effort is made."¹⁰⁶ Yuan exhorted Chinese entrepreneurs to exhibit their products at national and international expositions.¹⁰⁷ He considered it urgent to acquire industrial equipment for industries such as textiles, flour milling, oil extraction, match making, and paper making, among other sectors. Many scholars today argue that Yuan launched a golden age of Chinese economic activity. During his presidency and in the decade that followed, about 102.8 enterprises were established each year, which testifies to significant industrial growth.¹⁰⁸ Yuan also thought it important for China to acquire new technologies. With his encouragement, the first aviation school was established in late 1913; by late the following year it had graduated forty-one pilots, the first of many more in the coming years. Because of this Yuan has been credited with launching China's aviation industry.¹⁰⁹ Because of his efforts to modernize the Chinese economy, Yuan now is praised as "a man of action" (*shiganjia*).¹¹⁰

Yuan's monetary reforms are also seen as a success. After the collapse of the Qing, a number of currencies, domestic and foreign, circulated throughout China. Given the confusion that resulted, people suffered from unfair exchange rates, superfluous surcharges, relentless depreciation, and untimely shortages. Provincial currencies could not be used beyond their borders. Foreign money penetrated some parts of the country and in some regions became the dominant local tender. Yuan considered it probable that China's financial situation would deteriorate unless he took action, so he flexed his presidential power to initiate monetary reform. On February 7, 1914, his government issued the National Currency Act and accompanying regulations. Scholars today credit him with establishing the silver standard, for silver dollars – known as "Yuan Head Money" (*Yuantoubi*) or "Yuan the Big Head" (*Yuandatou*) – now became the medium of exchange in economic transactions. Coinage was

now minted under the state's authority, and all coins the state produced were to be used throughout the nation for commerce, for paying taxes, and for all monetary transactions. There would be three different kinds of coins: the silver dollar and other smaller silver denominations (50, 20, and 10 cents); a nickel coin (5 cents); and much smaller units of copper coins.¹¹¹ Yuan ordered that existing currencies be retired, allowing them to be exchanged for the new one. This reform represented a major effort to stabilize the national economy by establishing a single currency, assisting national banks (such as the Bank of China and the Bank of Communication), and counteracting the inroads made by foreign money.¹¹² Some scholars argue that "Yuan's contributions in this regard should not be devalued."¹¹³

CONCLUSION

Yuan Shikai's presidency was unprecedented as well as far-reaching in its historical effects. The new republican system compelled the Chinese to explore an uncharted realm. During his leadership in this uncharted territory, Yuan had adapted to the new situation. Unfortunately, he was not a democrat, and his one-man rule led to dictatorship – in the words of US minister Reinsch, he became a dictator-president. If we define dictatorship as one-man's rule, Yuan was indeed a dictator. If we compare him with twentieth-century dictators who dominated national politics, monopolized the national economy, and escalated paramount domestic control, he was not such a dictator. He built dictatorial centralism, in that he outlawed the opposition party and dissolved Congress. He did not believe that Western democracy could work in his country – a point he vividly elaborated to Reinsch: "The Chinese republic is a very young baby. It must be nursed and kept from taking strong meat or potent medicines like those prescribed by foreign doctors."¹¹⁴ His authoritarian policies steered China onto a dictatorial path; he turned republicanism into a rubber stamp. In his mind, the greatest threat facing China was national instability, and for that reason he wasted no time in enforcing centralist measures, paying only lip service to the representative system.

As Yuan conducted weak-nation diplomacy, he was unable to counterbalance the great powers and Japan and thus was coerced into accepting foreign demands that worked against China's national interests. The outcome of the long and arduous negotiations with Japan over its Twenty-One Demands was national humiliation. But the rumours about Yuan's

alleged traitorous actions in this regard were largely the product of political propaganda, which was far from the historical reality. The whispers about his dirty deal with Japan – supposedly in exchange for support of his monarchical project – proved to be without basis. In recent years, scholars have spoken highly of Yuan for his role in minimizing national losses, asserting that “Yuan Shikai’s government had achieved certain victory” during his negotiation with Japan,¹¹⁵ that “Yuan Shikai tried to curtail national loss and retrieve national interest, and that he actually achieved a certain amount of success.”¹¹⁶ T.K. Tong argues that “the demands Yuan accepted were as different from their original version as the distance between the sky and earth.”¹¹⁷ Briefly put, Yuan was not a traitor, and “the national tragedy should not be simply unloaded on Yuan alone.”¹¹⁸

The most neglected area in the study of Yuan’s presidency has been his reform programs. Many of these were part of his ongoing policies; some entailed a broadening of existing programs and others were new initiatives. Yuan hoped to rely on competent officials to carry out his policies, and to that end he reinforced administrative efficiency, stressing the importance of low-ranking officials and building a new system of official ranks. He emphasized judicial independence and intended to see that all cases were resolved impartially. In the realm of education, Yuan viewed moral decline as a clear danger and proposed a three-part goal – morality, intelligence, physical strength – as a solution. Convinced that China was beginning to degenerate, he set out to employ Confucianism to boost national unity and pride. He advocated the restoration of Confucianism and supported the study of Qing history, but he also adamantly opposed the restoration of the Qing dynasty. His far-reaching reform programs also included policies on social order. His response to civil disturbances was swift and ruthless. Widespread poverty in the nation troubled Yuan, who encouraged entrepreneurship and promoted economic development as a solution. The growth of the Chinese economy in the 1910s and 1920s, while moderate by Western standards, indicated that his policies were working. It is no wonder that recent scholars have credited his policies with shaping an economic “golden age” in China.

I2

“Emperor”

Yuan Shikai's monarchical project was a highly unusual time in his own life and a bizarre episode in modern Chinese history. After his eighty-three-day emperorsip from January 1, 1916, to March 23, 1916, he was forced to “abdicate” during a nationwide uprising against him. In the four years that followed the Qing collapse, China had changed from an empire to a republic and then to a monarchy. For his imperial ambitions, Yuan was despised by the revolutionaries, condemned by the Constitutionalists, and criticized by his own Beiyang Clique. After his death, his enemies dominated politics, monopolized the historical verdict on him, and fashioned a long-lasting judgment against him. As politics spilled into history, his infamy took deep root. The revolutionaries craved ideological unity and adopted an almost unanimous verdict on his legacy. In the following years, many negative labels were attached to his “emperorsip”: “restoration maniac” (*fubikuang*), “tyrannical and brutal monarch” (*zhuan-zhibaojun*), “autocratic traitor” (*dufuminzei*), “treacherous thief” (*luanchenzeizi*), “unpardonable culprit” (*bushezuiren*), “arch-criminal” (*zuikuihuoshou*), and the man who “turned back the historical clock” (*kailishidaoché*).¹ All these charges were believed to be justified by his wrongdoings as he took a retrogressive path, restored dynastic rule, and turned the republic back into an “empire.”

In recent decades, China has moved into the reform age and perceptions of Yuan have become both more diverse and more objective. Scholars have broken with past revolutionary dogma and the rigid legacy of the past. Recent scholarly publications do not echo the previous mass verdict.

Instead they have examined the causes, evolution, and impact of Yuan's monarchical project. Some argue that his monarchy was not some sort of personal project (*dizhiziwei*) as previously thought; instead, the events were driven by complex external forces.² It is true that very few so far have taken the initiative to rehabilitate Yuan with regard to his monarchical endeavour; most still denounce him for it and sharply criticize him for his miscalculation. That said, the new objective scholarship represents a sharp departure from the revolutionary historiography. Recent assessments have tended to be more impartial: scholars coolly criticize Yuan's mistakes and refer to his monarchism as an error (*baibi*).³

The new scholarship has broadened its parameters, delving into primary and secondary sources to bring the facts to light. A number of scholars have filtered those facts, corrected faulty notions, and recovered the historical truth. They have rejected past exaggerations, distortions, and demonizations. Given the seriousness of this topic, they remain cautious, aware that danger awaits if they move too far or too quickly. Recent efforts to correct past "facts" have led to a more plausible historical account. Scholars have not yet achieved unanimity – far from it – and their differences have been contentious. Even so, we can say that their previous radical verdict has been overturned. They generally concur that Yuan's monarchical endeavour led to national disaster and (for him) personal tragedy. They agree that he made an enormous mistake, since an emperorship cannot be imposed without consent. Yet his monarchism was not completely self-driven; rather, it was enabled by the complicated social, historical, political, and international milieu. Unfortunately, the failure of his monarchist project led to a breakdown in the relationship between the central government and the regional power centres, which opened the gates for the warlord era in China.

THE MONARCHICAL MOVEMENT

It is false to think that Yuan Shikai publicly promoted monarchy, as the traditional view holds, and that he championed the monarchical cause for his own purposes. The primary documents do not support such claims. Indeed, before late 1915, Yuan had always publicly defended the republican system, disparaged monarchist moves, and criticized those who spread monarchist rumours. Soon after the 1911 Revolution, some compared Yuan to Napoleon Bonaparte and surmised that he would be a Chinese Napoleon. Yuan angrily rejected that accusation and reaffirmed his republican

convictions.⁴ In March 1913, when another rumour circulated that Yuan was going to proclaim a monarchy, Yuan decried this as “absurd and despicable.”⁵ As he grew more powerful, this sort of gossip never faded into oblivion; on the contrary, it constantly resurfaced. In late October of 1913, Yuan upheld his commitment to republicanism, averring that he would “never proclaim himself to be a monarch.”⁶ He created the impression that he had faithfully carried out his duties as president and that he sincerely supported republicanism on moral grounds. He knew that if he had wanted to restore monarchy, he faced two hurdles: his repeated pledges not to do so, and the republican system itself. With the stakes so high, he acted cautiously to avoid any dreadful consequences. He understood that changing the existing political system would be a serious matter. Had he planned to do so, the plausible approach, perhaps, would have been to let others push for it until he reluctantly accepted it.

Why, then, did Yuan suddenly embrace monarchy in late 1915 after repeatedly declaring he would uphold republicanism? There is no ready answer to that perplexing but often asked question, although a host of causes can be identified. Macro-causes included the ancient imperial tradition, which had fostered a pro-imperial mindset, and a psychological vacuum produced by the abrupt end to two millennia of dynastic rule. Micro-causes included the chaotic post-revolutionary situation that made people yearn for stability, the economic recovery of 1914–15 that created a positive image of Yuan’s rule, and hopes that Yuan’s dynastic rule might lead to a better future.⁷ On the personal level, Yuan’s perilous battles against his political rivals were over; having concentrated power in his hands, perhaps he felt it easier to pursue further changes, including a return to monarchy.⁸ His belief in superstition was perhaps another factor, for geomancers had told him that by establishing a monarchy he would smash his family curse, which held that men in the Yuan family would rarely live beyond their fifties. The suggestion here was that he would live long if he founded a monarchy. Also, *fengshui* masters had told him that his ancestral tombs had shown a blessed sign favouring imperial rule.⁹ An analysis of the causes of Yuan’s monarchy is difficult, for they are multiple and require further deep inquiry.

At the outset, no one was more involved in Yuan’s monarchical moves than his eldest son Yuan Keding (1878–1958), who was handsome, intelligent, and well-educated. He had gone to Korea with his father as a boy and studied in Germany for a time. He was fluent in a number of foreign languages. His strong education, diplomatic skills, amiable nature, and competence won his father’s love. Yuan Keding had served in the

Qing government but did not assume an official title after the 1911 Revolution. Disastrously, he was injured in a 1913 equestrian accident. After recovering, he positioned himself backstage to initiate the monarchical movement, promoting imperial ideology, organizing relevant activities, and attracting participants from various levels of the social strata. He tried to convince people that an emperor was needed. He hired writers to print dummy versions of a newspaper called *Shuntianshibao* (*Times for Moving towards Heaven*), which was Yuan Shikai's favourite daily paper. The newspaper was Japanese-owned but printed in Chinese and had broad circulation. Because Yuan Shikai read it every day and because the fake version carried articles promoting monarchy, he was perhaps swayed by the apparent "public support" and "positive international opinion." Through this ruse, Yuan Keding succeeded in separating his father from the real world.¹⁰

Yuan Shikai's monarchical endeavours should be examined in the context of the international setting, given that Chinese rulers during those decades often bowed to foreign pressure. In other words, without the powers' consent or acquiescence, Yuan likely would not have made such a bold move. The primary sources indicate that the important foreign powers at first expressed their tacit agreement. According to Zhu Qiqian, a high-ranking official close to Yuan, "Yuan's monarchical movement started with German encouragement," with Kaiser Wilhelm II telling the Chinese that monarchy would be more suitable for China.¹¹ The notion that the Germans lit the spark for Yuan's monarchism is not groundless, because Germany was a strong power and German advice would not have been overlooked. The British attitude, by contrast, was ambiguous, as is clear from British minister Jordan's conversation with Yuan Shikai on October 2, 1915. Jordan did not oppose Yuan's constitutional monarchy, provided that civil disturbances did not occur. He added: "this is China's internal affairs which should not be interfered with by any others."¹² Those words suggested that the British would stay neutral during Yuan's move towards monarchy. Similarly, the Americans took an equivocal attitude. Yet Yuan felt that US minister Reinsch was on his side, since the latter had a plan to offer him asylum during the anti-Yuan war.¹³ The powers were not unanimous, for each had its own interests. Even so, Yuan read their signals correctly: in their vagueness, he saw acquiescence.

Some foreigners, especially Yuan's foreign advisers, such as Frank Goodnow (1859–1939), were seen as in the vanguard of the monarchical movement, although recent studies show that Yuan's supporters were exploiting them. Goodnow, a professor at Columbia University, was

invited to offer advice on the future political system. In the summer of 1915 he composed a memorandum titled “On Republicanism and Monarchy” in which he criticized the suddenness of China’s rebirth as a republic and contended that the new system was incompatible with the people’s political wishes. In his view, a monarchy would be more appropriate for China. If that road were taken, he hinted, there might be bumps along the way. He set three conditions for its success: the absence of opposition from foreign powers, the establishment of durable succession laws, and the maturity of constitutional politics.¹⁴ Goodnow had not written that memorandum for publication, but it was published anyway and enjoyed broad circulation. No sooner was it published than he realized he was being used. His protests were ignored. It is wrong to claim, as the traditional view does, that Goodnow was part of an enthusiastic vanguard for Yuan’s monarchism,¹⁵ yet nobody should deny that his article played a unique role in promoting Yuan’s monarchical movement.

Perhaps no individual was more pivotal in the pursuit of constitutional monarchy than Yang Du (1875–1930). Yang, a Hunanese, succeeded in the Civil Service Examination during the late Qing period, studied in Japan, and returned to become an official. Yang had become committed to monarchy within the framework of constitutional rule. He became a theorist for Yuan’s monarchism. He believed that constitutional monarchy was late in arriving in China and that any further delay would harm the country. Ignoring criticism and defiant of threats, he ventured towards that goal. In April 1915 he published a pamphlet titled “National Salvation through Constitutional Monarchy” in which he enumerated China’s problems and predicted chaos if the republic continued. He harshly blamed the republic for the country’s existing problems and asserted that China could not be strong and could not achieve prosperity under the republican system. The priority now, according to Yang Du, should be to pursue constitutional monarchy, which would enable the people to sweep away all republican evils and realize national eternal happiness.¹⁶

Yang Du turned his words into action and rallied prestigious elites, known as the Six Gentlemen, to organize the Prepare for Peace Society (*Chou’anhui*) in the summer of 1915. These six men, besides Yang Du, were Sun Yuyun (1872–1924), Yan Fu (1854–1921), Liu Shiwei (1884–1919), Hu Ying (1884–1932), and Li Xiehe (1854–1927). All of these other five, except Yan Fu, were former revolutionaries. The traditional view is that these six were opportunists who readily switched from one camp to another for personal gain. In any case, this group intended to steer China away from the republican orbit for which they had so recently fought but with

which they had become disillusioned. Their common conviction was that only constitutional monarchy could accelerate national modernization, for it would ensure stability and peace. In their joint declaration issued on August 14, 1915, they exposed the defects of republicanism, belittled its role in state-building, and predicted more troubles to come. They ridiculed the hasty establishment of a flawed republic, blaming it for bringing forth disasters.¹⁷ After the society was formally established on August 23, 1915, it strongly championed constitutional monarchy and called for the people to dump the pseudo-republic (*weigonghe*).¹⁸

As Yang Du grew more rabid on behalf of monarchism, he encountered Yuan's "opposition." In June 1915, Japanese newspapers reported that Yuan would assume the emperorship. Yuan responded by remarking that "nothing is more foolish than a man becoming emperor. For national salvation, I have already sacrificed myself, and I would rather not sacrifice my descendants."¹⁹ Superficially, he distanced himself from Yang Du's efforts. By the time Yang established the Prepare for Peace Society, some officials were accusing Yang of illegal activities. Those who viewed Yang as a thorn in China's flesh proposed that he and his comrades be punished. On receiving the accusations, Yuan adopted a protective stance, stating that "those gatherings do not necessarily clash with our republican principles and should not be rudely terminated ... Rather, those could be viewed as scholarly activities."²⁰ During an interview with an American reporter in mid-October, Yuan maintained that "monarchy does not match progress and enlightenment ... and republicanism ... is superior to monarchy."²¹ In another interview with the same reporter, he declared that "the claim that I support monarchy ... was not formulated by my friends but by my enemies."²² From those statements, it is hard to imagine that he would soon accept the monarchy. From another angle, however, it is fair to argue that he had protected monarchists and offered them a limited kind of patronage.

More officials soon joined the fledgling monarchical movement, fueling the zeal for an emperor. Liang Shiyi (1869–1933), the minister of communications, became another leading proponent. According to Yuan Keqi's memoir, Liang Shiyi had participated in this movement intending to cover up his corruption, although other sources indicate that he was enticed by Yuan Keding to join it.²³ In any case, Liang Shiyi and his followers carried the monarchical movement to new heights; in particular, he raised funds for it and organized popular petitions for political change. Suddenly, a variety of petition groups emerged in Beijing, including the Chamber of Commerce Petition League, the Rickshaw Petition League,

the Confucian Society Petition League, the Women's Petition League, and the Beggars' Petition League.²⁴ They pointed out the weaknesses of republicanism, enumerated its serious problems, emphasized the people's suffering, highlighted the risk it posed to China's future, and made urgent calls for constitutional monarchy. Petition groups from various provinces pressed for the same change. Abruptly, the streets of Beijing became congested with noisy parades, blaring processions, and raucous petitioners. The United Association of National Petition was founded in Beijing on September 19, 1915, to champion monarchism.²⁵ This association gathered together supporters and attracted sympathizers. A multitude of fervent petitioners having come together, the monarchical movement reached a high point, creating the impression that monarchism was now popular across the nation.

Facing the deluge of petitions, Yuan Shikai decided to let the people determine the future national political system. On October 8, 1915, he approved the order that the Political Participation Council (*Canzhengyuan*) organize the National Representative Assembly (*Guomindaibiaodahui*), authorizing that body to make the final ruling.²⁶ The order required that all representatives be elected, that each county choose one, and that various ethnic groups, civil societies, and overseas Chinese organizations select representatives.²⁷ Yuan hoped that through this arrangement, a sharp distinction would be drawn between a self-appointed emperorship and the popularly endorsed constitutional monarchy. His intent was to show that he was not a vicious devil seizing power but a legitimate monarch elected by popular vote. He also meant to demonstrate that he had gained popular allegiance and was not a pseudo-monarch. The election (more like a selection) of representatives started in the provinces in late October 1915. Each county representative went to his provincial capital to cast his ballot. The Political Participation Council in Beijing would collect all the ballots and announce the results. This superficially fair “election” was carefully planned. The representatives were selected with prudence, and each received a whopping sum of \$500 for travel expenses.²⁸ Any opposition would result in expulsion from the list. Yuan's agent, Zhu Qiqian, dispatched secret telegrams to provincial officials to regulate the “election.”²⁹

It should be noted that the monarchical movement was not a solo performance by Yuan; rather, it was a nationwide manoeuvre supported by Yuan's confidants, high-ranking officials, family members, and others. To Yuan's satisfaction, the result was what he had expected. On December 11, 1915, the Political Participation Council, designated as the acting

legislature, announced the result of the election: all 1,993 ballots endorsed constitutional monarchy and supported Yuan as emperor of the Chinese Empire (*Zhonghuadiguo*). On behalf of the representatives, the council beseeched Yuan to assume the throne immediately, claiming that it was the people's will. To their surprise, Yuan bluntly declined, arguing that he had pledged to support the republic, that he was a guardian of republicanism, and that he would lose trust if he became emperor. He asked the council to find another candidate.³⁰

What happened after Yuan declined the emperorship was theatrical. In the late afternoon of December 11, 1915, the council held a special meeting and decided to present a second imperial advocacy. In it, Yuan was portrayed as an indispensable ruler and as the only individual qualified for the throne. His six great accomplishments were underscored: training the first modern army, suppressing the Boxer Uprising, enforcing progressive reform, achieving post-revolutionary conciliation, putting down the Second Revolution, and conducting diplomacy with neighbours. To absolve Yuan from the guilt of violating his republican pledges, the document stated that "the pledge to the republic was effective only if the peoples' will supported republicanism. If the people have switched to constitutional monarchy, the previous pledge was automatically relinquished." "As the presidency does not exist anymore, the former presidential pledges naturally disappear."³¹ Yuan's "reluctance" and the monarchists' fervour created the impression that he was compelled to accept the monarchy. Under this "pressure," he issued a public order declaring his acceptance on December 13, 1915, although he had accepted it orally on the previous day. He claimed that he was following the people's will and that he respected the Mandate of Heaven, and he promised to carry out his duties for national salvation.³² On December 31, 1915, Yuan proclaimed his Hongxian Monarchy and declared 1916 to be the first year of Hongxian (the Grand Constitution).³³ It seems that so far, the monarchical movement had been a great success. To Yuan's sorrow, it was in fact the beginning of a personal tragedy and a national calamity.

YUAN'S MONARCHICAL FAILURE

The burgeoning monarchical movement attracted countless petitioners and seemed to herald Yuan's triumph. To his pleasure, he had been "elected" without violence or acrimony. Having accepted the results, he began implementing imperial orders. He viewed his monarchy as a hybrid of the

British, German, and Japanese styles of constitutional monarchy. He declared that national sovereignty belonged to the state and was exercised by the monarch and the people. The executive power of the emperor and the legislative power must be balanced, and the judicial power should gradually become independent. To show his progressive spirit, Yuan announced that the imperial household would have limited influence.³⁴ He ordered the abolition of the eunuch system owing to its cruelty, and female officials were to be employed in his inner court.³⁵ Many long-term reforms would continue, including his promotion of education, his revamping of the civil service, and his ban on the opium trade.³⁶ It seemed that nothing had changed except his title. To woo national elites, he created a system of noble ranks and bestowed on 130 prominent individuals titles such as prince, duke, marquis, earl, viscount, and baron. He promised that these would be hereditary titles with pecuniary benefits.³⁷ For his lifelong friends, Yuan offered special appellations and exempted them from imperial duties. Four of his closest friends – Xu Shichang, Zhao Erxun, Li Jingxi, and Zhang Jian – were dubbed “the Four Friends of Mount Song” (*Songshansiyou*) after the holy mountain in Henan.³⁸ Yet before Yuan could fully implement his imperial measures, an anti-Yuan movement swept the country and compelled him to repudiate his imperial title. The question arises: Who were the enemies of his constitutional monarchism?

It may come as a surprise that high-ranking Beiyang generals and politicians were among Yuan’s reluctant collaborators, unwilling supporters, and even staunch opponents. Yuan’s monarchism turned them hostile, especially as they believed it to be both foolish and unfeasible. They had supported Yuan for decades, and their careers were beholden to his patronage. But they also viewed monarchy as incompatible with the times and believed it would have serious repercussions. The spectre of monarchy haunted them so greatly that they adopted an oppositional stance. Li Yuanhong was an important figure in the Beiyang Clique, although he had no ties with Yuan before the revolution. However, his family was linked to Yuan’s through marriage. Li strongly resisted the monarchy; he was the first to have the title of “prince” bestowed on him, but he refused to accept it and threatened to commit suicide if coerced.³⁹ Yuan’s old friend, Xu Shichang, did not commit himself to the monarchical cause and resigned soon afterwards.⁴⁰ Feng Guozhang, a military commander in Nanjing and Yuan’s pillar for years, had grown disappointed with Yuan. In June 1915, concerned about the rumour of monarchy, he travelled to Beijing to persuade Yuan to squelch the rumour. Yuan reassured Feng that he would not become emperor. Yet months later, he reversed himself and

took the imperial title. Feeling betrayed, Feng became hostile and “posed as a big obstacle” to Yuan’s monarchy.⁴¹ Duan Qirui, another confidant of Yuan, did not conceal his anti-monarchism. He bluntly warned Yuan not to become a historical villain.⁴² This hostility continued even after Duan’s resignation. As a consequence, Duan was the only high-ranking general not to have a title of noble rank bestowed on him. During his “retirement,” Duan was assigned a cook by Yuan, but Duan was careful never to eat the food that man prepared.⁴³ Yuan, the “patriarch” of the Beiyang Clique, had become a target of aversion among his own men.

Sun Yat-sen responded immediately to Yuan’s acceptance of the monarchy by calling for a new revolution. He remarked that “the future of our motherland has suddenly become more darkened. The republic built by our martyrs has unexpectedly turned out to be the private possession of the Yuan family. Four hundred million compatriots wept profusely ... and see the third revolution as the best remedy for national salvation.”⁴⁴ In his anti-Yuan proclamation, Sun portrayed Yuan as a national thief (*minzei*) and lamented that the Chinese people now lived in bondage. He called on the people to fight to save the republic.⁴⁵ Sun had been defeated a couple of years earlier, but now he reorganized his followers as the Chinese Revolutionary Party, which played an active part in the anti-Yuan movement. In February 1916, Sun’s follower Ju Zheng led an army that occupied six county seats in Shandong. Sun’s other followers occupied various parts in Guangdong and attacked the provincial capital there. Yet to claim that Sun was the only national leader of the anti-Yuan movement would not be accurate; Cai E’s Protect the Nation Army in Yunnan would play a more important role in forcing Yuan to “abdicate.”

Perhaps no other intellectual was more crucial in dethroning Yuan than Liang Qichao. In a particular way, Liang was a classic symbol of China’s transition from tradition to modernity. He was on the cusp of his generation in terms of scholarly acumen, modernizing ideas, and political reforms. His deep wisdom, broad influence, and tenacious determination were indispensable for China as a nation. Liang from the very beginning was a sharp critic and an intrepid opponent of Yuan’s monarchy. Although he was known for vacillating between empire and republic, his opposition to Yuan’s monarchy was unrelenting. No sooner had Yang Du organized the Prepare for Peace Society than Liang published his pamphlet condemning it.⁴⁶ He wrote Yuan private letters to persuade him not to latch himself to monarchy, not to defy republicanism, and not to become a target of public wrath.⁴⁷ Deeply disillusioned by Yuan’s acceptance of the monarchy, Liang secretly waged war, encouraging his disciple

Cai E to coordinate with military commanders in the southwest.⁴⁸ Liang did not hesitate to take up arms to save the nascent republic. According to his diary, he immediately left northern China for Shanghai after Yuan proclaimed the empire, then departed for Hong Kong by hiding in a tiny room near the stove in the ship's hold to avoid being found. A few days later, he arrived in Vietnam.⁴⁹ He then travelled through the mountainous borderlands alone, suffering from hunger and in great danger, before reaching southwestern China to join the Protect the Nation Army in late March 1916. There he soon established a rival government.⁵⁰ Liang loomed large in the ensuing fighting and would be acclaimed responsible for Yuan's failure to establish a monarchy.

Yuan's monarchism enraged liberal intellectuals. Most of them had studied abroad and been exposed to progressive ideas and possessed a dim view of monarchism. In contrast to most ordinary Chinese, these intellectuals had developed a mentality that favoured republicanism, adopted a vision built squarely on political and social progress, and had become antagonistic towards any reversion to the old order. As Yuan revealed his monarchist intentions, these intellectuals' anti-imperial feelings grew stronger, and they lashed out at Yuan. Chen Duxiu in his newly published *The New Youth* wrote that “the nomenclatures of emperors and kings should have already perished after the Qing abdication edict,” but unfortunately the Prepare for Peace Society led to “the problem of the national political system.”⁵¹ Former pro-Yuan intellectuals suddenly became anti-Yuan radicals; Li Dazhao was one of these. Born in Zhili, Li had benefited from Yuan's reforms and become a Yuan supporter. Yuan's monarchism infuriated him so much that he rushed back from Japan to participate in the anti-Yuan movement. He declared:

All those who dare to rekindle the tyrannical cinders, or reignite the monarchical flames, whether the followers of the Prepare for Peace Society or the adherents of dynastic restoration, should be regarded as traitors of the state and public enemies of citizens. Their organization should be exterminated, their books burned, their backers eradicated, and their roots removed. Their sprouts should be destroyed so that they could not grow and proliferate. Then, there will be a hope of great prospect for our country.⁵²

The shifting stance of the foreign powers also played a role in Yuan's failed attempt at monarchy. Their ambiguous attitude at first emboldened Yuan, but then they quickly switched to an unfriendly posture after

watching internal tensions emerge. They warned Yuan of the impending danger and requested that he retreat from his monarchism. Within a few months, their attitude had changed from reluctant consent, to wait-and-see hesitation, and then to surly disapproval. The Western powers would stay neutral during the approaching conflict between Yuan and the rebels. Their neutrality signalled opposition, given that they regarded Yuan's regime as the legal government. Japan tried to derail Yuan in a number of ways. In this regard, scholarly publications about Japan's role in Yuan's failure have abounded in recent years, with scholars arguing that it was Japan that initiated hostility to Yuan's monarchy. In January 1916, Yuan's envoy, Zhou Ziqi, who had been sent to congratulate the new Japanese emperor, was refused entry into Japan. Japan claimed that Yuan's monarchy had disturbed the East Asian order, according to which Japan reserved the right to dispatch troops to China.⁵³ Japan took quick action to communicate with and offer support to the four forces opposing Yuan: Cai E, Sun Yat-sen, Liang Qichao, and some Beiyang generals, including Duan Qirui and Feng Guozhang. Japan provided weapons and war materials to anti-Yuan forces. Kwan Ha Yim contends that "Japanese policies carried a deadly weight" and that "the decisive factor contributing to Yuan's fall was Japanese opposition."⁵⁴

The provincial power claimants became the drivers of military action to counteract Yuan's monarchism. During the early republic, provincial military commanders had integrated themselves with the regional bureaucracies and thereby shaped a centrifugal force. Those leaders used local resources to consolidate their military and political power, refused to submit full taxes to the central government, and shaped their own local semi-independent identities. To a large extent, this regionalism had been built on a foundation of local interests; those leaders, having grasped power, viewed regionalism as essential to the fulfillment of those interests. They were often unable to coordinate their activities, but at critical moments they sometimes did so to defy the central government. Their relationship with Yuan was unpredictable. When Yuan was strong, they disguised themselves as submissive followers; when Yuan was weak, they openly challenged him; and when Yuan became fragile, they declared independence from him. The military commanders in Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi, who cooperated with Liang Qichao to fight Yuan, exemplified this trend.⁵⁵ Another exemplar was Zhang Xun, who had supported the Qing but now opposed Yuan's monarchism. His troops in Xuzhou, Jiangxi Province, refused to fly the republic's flag, and his soldiers still wore long queues (braids) to express their loyalty to the Qing. During Yuan's

monarchical movement, Yuan sent his confidant Ruan Zhongshu to persuade Zhang Xun not to openly challenge Yuan. But when Yuan needed his military assistance, Zhang Xun abruptly refused to give it.⁵⁶ These local forces were unreliable: they might support Yuan one day, oppose him the next, and rally back to his side again if they obtained gains.

No force was more lethal than the Protect the Nation Movement (*Huguoyundong*) in forcing Yuan to relinquish his monarchy. Its initiator was Liang Qichao, who encouraged Cai E, his disciple, to escape Yuan's control in Beijing by travelling to the southwest, where he launched that movement. Cai arrived in Kunming, Yunnan Province, on December 19, 1915. He immediately held a meeting with Tang Jiyao, the local military commander, to plan an anti-Yuan military rebellion. On December 24, Cai dispatched a telegraph to Yuan, urging him to punish the monarchists and to return China to republicanism. A one-day deadline was set for Yuan to accept their ultimatum. It was rejected. Without delay, they declared Yunnan's independence on December 25 and instantly organized the Protect the Nation Army, consisting of three main forces. Cai E became the commander of the first army, which targeted Sichuan; Li Liejun the commander of the second army, which attacked Guangxi and Hunan; and Tang Jiyao the commander of the third army, which was held in reserve to support Cai and Li. Their goal was to occupy southern China and then launch a northern expedition to overthrow Yuan. On January 1, 1916, they issued an anti-Yuan proclamation in which they listed Yuan's twenty crimes, condemned him as a national thief, requested his departure, and called for a return to the republic.⁵⁷ Within a few days, the army was marching towards Sichuan and Guizhou. The following month, Guizhou declared independence. Although the Protect the Nation Army was not large, it proclaimed to the nation that Yuan's claim to express the "people's will" was deceptive and that a new and powerful anti-Yuan movement was under way.

Yuan's military suppression did not pan out well. As soon as Yuan heard about Yunnan's revolt, he took action. On December 29, 1915, he ordered that Cai and others be stripped of their official titles and reviled them for ruining China's national honour, infringing on the people's will, and vilifying the head of state.⁵⁸ He accused them of organizing a conspiracy, destroying national unity, and committing treason. To Yuan, Cai E was duplicitous, in that he had first advocated monarchy and then started a rebellion.⁵⁹ In his proclamations, Yuan continued to disparage Cai for his sedition and called on all to crush him. On January 5, 1916, Yuan ordered Cao Kun to lead a military expedition to attack Yunnan by

three routes. The force following the first route, led by Ma Jizeng, was to march through Hunan and assault Guizhou and Yunnan; the force following the second route, led by Zhang Jingyao, was to enter Sichuan to attack Yunnan; the force following the third route, led by Long Jiguang, was to invade Guangxi and then Yunnan.⁶⁰ Fierce battles were fought, such as the one at Xuzhou, in Sichuan, where Cai's army seized the city in January but lost it in March. However, the war in general was dubbed "the strange war," for it evolved into "a war of tongues," with each side hurling accusations at the other in telegrams, newspapers, and pamphlets. Yuan's forces were superior in terms of numbers, weaponry, and equipment, but his northern soldiers had a hard time acclimating themselves in the south; they were also weak in both discipline and morale. As a result, Yuan's army could not accomplish its goal of a quick victory. Its only major triumph was Feng Yuxiang's occupation of Xuzhou on March 2, 1916, for which the elated Yuan bestowed upon Feng, the future famous Christian warlord, the noble title of baron.⁶¹ The independence of Guangxi led by Lu Rongting on March 15, 1916, was a heavy blow to Yuan. Facing a prolonged stalemate and incremental losses, Yuan's top generals, including Feng Guozhang, dispatched a secret telegram to provincial leaders urging them to persuade Yuan to relinquish the monarchy. Needless to say, this came as a thunderbolt to Yuan, who now believed he was doomed.⁶²

In early 1916, Yuan felt pressed by the news from all fronts to take action before further disasters struck. He would have to relinquish the monarchy due to complex circumstances he could no longer control. On March 21, 1916, he convened a special meeting with his high-ranking officials. When he proposed abolishing the monarchy, only one diehard general, Ni Sichong, still declared his allegiance; all the others concurred with Yuan. The following day, Yuan announced his decision to step down from his emperorship. He said he had accepted the monarchy because of his desire for "national salvation" and that he alone would bear the responsibility, and he made it clear that he would retreat from his failed monarchy back to the presidency.⁶³ On March 23, 1916, he formally proclaimed the termination of the Hongxian dynasty.⁶⁴ He had been emperor for eighty-three days. However, this number has been contested. Some assert that it was eighty-two days, for Yuan's decision on March 22 should be seen as the end.⁶⁵ Some argue that it should be 102 days, for his acceptance of the monarchy on December 12, 1915, was the first day.⁶⁶ Others argue that he should not be viewed as emperor at all, because he never held a coronation and his

title among the international community continued to be president. In other words, his simultaneous use of president and emperor invalidated his emperorship.⁶⁷

THE DEATH OF YUAN SHIKAI

Yuan's repeal of his short-lived monarchy did not end the national crisis. In fact, his intention to stay on as president precipitated a new burst of rage, for his legitimacy as president was now harshly questioned. His indifference to demands that he step down from power unleashed fresh wrath, and his last days were darkened by hostility to his rule. In his view, the demands that he relinquish all leadership had overstepped the original ultimatum compelling him to relinquish the emperorship. Furthermore, the new demand was couched in hateful language. In early April 1916, under Cai E's directive, the three provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi put forward six requests as conditions to solve the national problem. Those demands included that Yuan end his leadership and go into exile, that thirteen principal monarchists be executed, that the property of Yuan and other monarchists be confiscated, and that Yuan's descendants be stripped of citizenship.⁶⁸ Yuan's indifference prompted Cai E to issue a new proclamation in which Yuan was charged with treason for which he must be punished by law passed by Congress.⁶⁹

Under the influence of Cai E, Liang Qichao, and others, several southern provinces declared independence from Yuan in April and May 1916, including Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Hunan. In their declarations, provincial leaders – some of whom were Yuan's confidants, such as Chen Yi in Sichuan and Tang Xiangming in Hunan – labelled him an illegal ruler, condemned him as a national villain, and abjured him by severing all ties.⁷⁰ Yuan's agony over these charges was bottomless. Those provincial leaders argued that it had become necessary to break away from Yuan, yet they did not intend to shape a new state identity. Rather, they would wait for Yuan's removal and the rise of a new leader before reaching national unity. By May 1916, most of southern China had become independent, and those provinces arrived at an understanding that Yuan must leave and that Li Yuanhong was the rightful president.

Sun Yat-sen did not play a leading role in the anti-Yuan war, but neither did he tinker around its edges. He was quite active in his efforts to oust Yuan. It is true that Sun's influence receded as his followers shrank in numbers. That said, his Chinese Revolutionary Party expressed a strong

will to topple Yuan.⁷¹ In April 1916, Sun declared in a speech that “only after the principal culprit [Yuan] is exterminated could the constitution be restored and the republic be revived.”⁷² In his proclamation issued in May 1916, he told the nation that “if Yuan continues to rule, the country cannot be preserved.” He called on all Chinese “to annihilate the evil thoroughly and never be tolerant towards Yuan,” for “only after the national thief is wiped out could the republic attain peace.”⁷³ Sun’s former colleague Huang Xing did not join the Chinese Revolutionary Party, but he supported Sun. Huang castigated Yuan for staying in office without a sense of shame. In a public telegram to Yuan on May 9, 1916, he prodded him with two scathing questions: “Isn’t it senselessly stupid, if a person stands against the whole nation? Isn’t it heartlessly cruel, if that person sacrifices numerous lives just for his political power?”⁷⁴ Clearly, the former revolutionaries led by Sun were not idle in the ongoing efforts to expel Yuan from politics.

National elites took action, requesting Yuan’s departure, resorting to a great deal of colourful language. In a barrage of telegrams, letters, and other notices, albeit courteous in tone, they demanded Yuan’s exit. Yuan’s long-term colleague, Tang Shaoyi, told him that “today’s [monarchical] affairs prompt our countrymen to take up arms to slaughter each other ... and the only and best strategy should be your intrepid self-withdrawal [*zitui*].”⁷⁵ Wu Tingfang’s suggestion was sarcastically humorous: he informed Yuan that “you have been diligent in state affairs for long and now have become old. You ought to take a moment to rest and recuperate at natural resorts. Perhaps, you may go overseas and take the opportunity to investigate foreign politics and familiarize yourself with their constitutions. When you return, you may be re-elected president.”⁷⁶ Kang Youwei offered amusing advice: “You should immediately bring your family to travel overseas. Sight-viewing the beauty of the diverse landscapes and enjoying the pleasure in other cultures would be much better than being emperor.”⁷⁷ Others’ advice was often laced with harsh animosity. The telegraph from the Overseas Chinese Association stated that “you [Yuan] have crowned yourself as emperor and you have broken state law. Even if you relinquished it, you have lost your presidential qualifications and you will not be recognized by the people ... you should immediately withdraw from politics.”⁷⁸

Under this unrelenting pressure, Yuan equivocated in his response as he pivoted from one volatile situation to the next. His initial reaction was to suppress his challengers. On April 1, 1916, he proposed his conditions to Cai E for solving the crisis, including the repeal of provincial

independence, a return to normal administrative order, the disbanding of new military units, and a halt to military conflicts.⁷⁹ These conditions reflected Yuan's harsh attitude. On the same day, he dispatched a secret telegram to his military commanders at the front, ordering them to annihilate the rebels. He told them they were in the same boat as him, because his presidency meant their fortune and future. If he did not remain emperor, their fate could not be predicted.⁸⁰ But the situation did not turn out as he expected. He now began to rue his monarchism.⁸¹ He admitted he was responsible for the present disaster.⁸² He planned to leave politics (*tuiwei*) and began to discuss it with his officials.⁸³ In his mind, what was now at stake was whether his successor could effectively control the northern troops, coordinate efficiently with military leaders, and address the nation's financial challenges.⁸⁴

The recent dramatic events had instilled in Yuan a profound hatred of certain individuals. The demise of his monarchy saddened him. He was filled with hysterical hatred for those who had opposed him, betrayed him, and abandoned him. He was not shy in uttering his feelings; indeed, he foamed at the mouth as he expressed them. On April 12, 1916, to Xu Shichang he uttered his abhorrence of four kinds of men: those who supported his monarchy but suddenly launched rebellions, those who continued to declare independence after his imperial surrender, those who proposed new demands far beyond their original ones, and those who followed the rebellion blindly without moral standards.⁸⁵ In fact, the four categories included most of those standing on the opposite side. He also loathed those whom he had assigned to important positions but who then betrayed him, such as Chen Yi in Sichuan and Tang Xiangming in Hunan. When Chen Yi declared the independence of Sichuan on May 22, 1916, Yuan used his frail voice and trembling hands to compose a telegram to Chen in which he conveyed his hatred of Chen's ungrateful defection.⁸⁶ He showed no feelings for those who tried to profit from his failure – in particular, for those who had been assigned to prepare his coronation and who were still trying to squeeze money out of him even after he ended his monarchy. Yuan accused them of being “heartless and conscienceless men” who had falsely informed and advised him.⁸⁷

The man Yuan hated most among his long-term followers was Feng Guozhang. During the raging national crisis, Feng had not offered any support; on the contrary, he had advised Yuan to announce his political withdrawal. More fatally, Feng had strongly opposed Yuan's military action against the rebel provinces.⁸⁸ In mid-May 1916, Feng convened a special meeting in Nanjing for the purpose of ousting Yuan. Feng

did not achieve his objective at the meeting; even so, his disloyalty greatly embittered Yuan. In a private conversation in late May, Yuan expressed a sudden jolt of anger at Feng. He declared that the rebellion in Yunnan and Guizhou in the frontier region was insignificant and that the independence of Zhejiang, Guangxi, and Guangdong could be dealt with easily. "The most hated man should be Feng Guozhang who has been my pillar for a long time but now he publicly announces his rebellious remarks," an action that caused great difficulty for Yuan, for it had a strong impact on public opinion.⁸⁹ In his last days, Yuan was overwhelmed with hatred. He loathed traitors, detested political chameleons, and despised opportunists. And naturally, he hated himself for making an unwise decision. This inner psychological turmoil damaged his health.

Yuan intended to delay his retirement from the presidency; meanwhile, his enemies did not relax for a single day. Instead they engaged in more high-level manoeuvring. Eager to expel Yuan, Liang Qichao and his colleagues established the Military Affairs Council (*Junwuyuan*) in Zhaoqing, Guangdong Province, on May 8, 1916, which functioned as a rival government. After it was set up, it issued proclamations, coordinated with provincial leaders, and showed off its wide scope of operations. Tang Jiyao was the military commander of this government; Liang Qichao served as president of the political affairs committee. In its declarations, the council made it clear that Yuan had disqualified himself as president by breaking the law. The council supported Li Yuanhong as president.⁹⁰ As far as the council was concerned, Yuan was a criminal waiting for arrest, sentencing, and punishment. "As long as Yuan still usurps the republican presidency, the public rage cannot recede." While there was no room for any compromise over Yuan's personal fate, the post-Yuan settlement would be addressed by national deliberation, dialogue, and reconciliation.⁹¹ According to Liang Qichao, "the existing national crisis was single-handedly created by Yuan. If Yuan remains in office, the country will confront upheavals and tumult continuously. Once Yuan departs from politics, all military conflicts will immediately vanish."⁹² The coexistence of two governments, one in the north and one in the south, placed unbearable pressure on Yuan.

In this nerve-racking situation, it was a matter of two and half months between Yuan's relinquishment of the emperorship on March 23, 1916, and his death on June 6, 1916. Ever since his death, people have tried to ascertain its causes. Many agree that the principal factor was stress caused by the national situation; no one could have stayed healthy carrying that

political weight on his shoulders. In other words, the anti-Yuan war hastened his death. Although there is no clear narrative tracing Yuan's path towards death, the primary sources left by those who knew him offer useful hints. According to his daughter Yuan Jingxue, his health started to deteriorate in early 1916, when he began suffering from depression.⁹³ The lethal factor in this may have been his trusted subordinates' betrayal, a factor that especially pained him.⁹⁴ He was not physically fit and was often ill. The sharp decline in his health must also have been connected to his lifestyle: for years, he seldom left the Presidential Palace, and that isolation was not conducive to his physical well-being. Genetic factors should not be ignored, given that most Yuan males died before their late fifties. Overeating might have been a factor: he ate too much, including meat at every meal, and this would have led to high levels of glucose and cholesterol.⁹⁵ One scholar has linked his death to too much sex with his young concubines.⁹⁶ Another argues that Yuan chose to die, viewing it as a proper way of solving the national crisis.⁹⁷ While we can pinpoint no single causative factor, the above points contain reasonable assumptions concerning his death.

As the anti-Yuan war raged on, Yuan continued to suffer from his ailments, for which he took Chinese medicine. He refused to retire from politics. Even in late May 1916, with his health deteriorating sharply, he continued to read official documents at his bedside. According to his daughter Yuan Jingxue, Yuan did not change his workaholic habits, instead continuing to labour to the very limits of his physical strength. Suddenly in early June, he was deprived of that ability, but even so, he refused to stop approving cases delivered to him.⁹⁸ His situation was deplorable. Besides family members, few came to visit him except for long-time friends and colleagues such as Xu Shichang and Duan Qirui.⁹⁹ Even worse, his family fought over his medical treatment: his eldest son insisted on Western medicine, while others preferred Chinese medicine. As his condition entered the critical stage, the Yuans invited the French doctor J.A. Bussiere to treat him. Dr. Bussiere's diagnosis was uremia, to which he applied remedies, but to no avail. Anticipating his death, Yuan called Xu Shichang, Duan Qirui, and Wang Shizhen to his bedside and left his last will. He regretted his imperial endeavour but blamed others for misleading him. He trusted Xu, Duan, and Wang to take care of his family. As for his successor, he told them clearly that Li Yuanhong should be the next president, and he ordered them to submit to Li.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps this was his last wise decision to avoid possible domestic turmoil. With all these things done, Yuan breathed his last in

the early morning of June 6, 1916, dying at the age of fifty-six without having broken his family curse.

Yuan's death brought an end to the national crisis, for it exonerated him from legal penalties and unshackled him from exile. In accordance with Yuan's arrangements, Li Yuanhong assumed the presidency on June 7, 1916. Li immediately ordered a state funeral, for which he allocated state funds of half a million dollars, and allowed an additional private donation of a quarter million dollars from Yuan's associates, including Xu Shichang and Duan Qirui. In his presidential order, Li praised Yuan for his vital role in the 1911 Revolution and for his industrious spirit, without mentioning his imperial ambitions. The government would fly the national flag at half-mast and suspend official entertainments for twenty-seven days; civilians were to suspend entertainments for seven days. Inside the Presidential Palace a hall of mourning was established for officials, friends, and visitors to pay their last respects. The funeral procession was set for June 28, during which Yuan's body in a casket, dressed in the imperial robes he had never worn, was transported from Beijing to Zhangde. The vast procession on June 28 was composed of officials, soldiers, priests, and others. President Li bowed to Yuan's body before it was carried from the Presidential Palace to the railway station. This extravagant state funeral was a great honour for Yuan. On that day, the Beijing-Hankou railway line halted regular service in order for Yuan's casket to be delivered by a special train to his beloved Huanshang Village. Many of his close colleagues and friends, including Xu Shichang and Duan Qirui, travelled with it to Zhangde. Roadside services were held at points along the railway line. With these detailed plans, Yuan's casket reached Zhangde on schedule.¹⁰¹

Yuan's death brought an end to the anti-Yuan war, although the anti-Yuan propaganda continued. Liang Qichao soon dismantled his rival government, the anti-Yuan provinces repealed their independence proclamations. They all recognized Li Yuanhong as president. Thus Li's order for Yuan's state funeral did not draw opposition, for it was widely recognized that Yuan's death had settled the most urgent disputes. Indeed, his death was followed by a bizarre tranquility that allowed Yuan a peaceful interment. The Funeral Committee decided to build a cemetery of twenty acres north of Huanshang Village. A German engineer was hired to build a mausoleum in the Ming royal style, with Yuan's tomb copying that of US president Ulysses S. Grant.¹⁰² The tomb was erected quickly, and Yuan was buried there on August 24, 1916. However, it would take two more years to complete the mausoleum. The Yuan Shikai Mausoleum (*Yuanlin*)

surpassed the magnificence of imperial tombs, featuring arcades, lofty pillars, stone-carved animals, delicate pavilions, side buildings, and artistic ornamentation.

A huge stone slab was inscribed with an epitaph written in Xu Shichang's calligraphy: “The Tomb of President Yuan Shikai.”¹⁰³ It was truly a sanctuary befitting a deceased monarch. The mausoleum would survive the coming wars and violent political movements. During the Maoist years, some officials proposed to Mao Zedong that it be demolished. Surprisingly, Mao paid a visit to the Yuan Shikai Mausoleum in late 1952. During his visit, he ordered that it be kept intact, with the following justification: “Do not demolish it; rather, maintain it well. It is a useful negative sample to educate future generations.”¹⁰⁴ It stands to this day as a state-endorsed historical and cultural heritage site.

CONCLUSION

Yuan Shikai's doomed monarchist adventure gave rise to diverse assessments. As news of his death reverberated throughout the nation, evaluations of the former president and (briefly) constitutional monarch clashed. The north arranged a state funeral with exuberant praise; the south regretted that his death had saved him from indictment and punishment. A revolutionary writer in Hubei Province remarked that “Traitor Yuan, for his heinous crimes, should be put to death on the guillotine. Only the capital penalty can slake the people's wrath. It is a pity that his sudden death let him off lightly.”¹⁰⁵ Articles and books excoriated Yuan, calling him a “treasonous culprit” (*panguozuiren*), “Traitor Yuan” (*Yuanni*), “primary evil” (*yuan'e*), “the origin of all evils” (*wan'ezhiyuan*), and “the Yuan poison” (*Yuandu*), among other insults.¹⁰⁶ After Chiang Kai-shek's “unification” in 1928, the Nationalist government endorsed this verdict, and Yuan's evil image as a reactionary out to restore the old order was established. Prior to the 1980s, there was no pressing need to change this verdict. Only since the relaxation of state controls in recent decades have scholars started to write more nuanced assessments. Although most scholars remain cautious, they have begun to redress the historical imbalance by examining his record and offering fact-based analyses. As a consequence, alternative opinions are now being voiced. In particular, some narratives have offered positive views of Yuan's imperial endeavours. Zhang Yongdong largely endorses Yuan's imperial effort, arguing that he intended his monarchy to prepare the country for stable constitutional rule; also, he wanted

to avoid “an armed struggle for the presidency.”¹⁰⁷ Positive voices like these are still feeble, for Yuan’s monarchism continues to attract criticism and remains a hotly debated topic.

From the outbreak of the 1911 Revolution to Yuan’s death, China underwent earth-shaking changes. The country had been an empire; four years later, by the time of Yuan’s death, China was a fragmented state. Those four years also witnessed a three-part historical cycle: from empire to republic, from republic to monarchy, and from monarchy back to republic. In those same four years, the country had experienced three catastrophic failures: imperial collapse, democratic miscarriage, and monarchical misfortune, with Yuan’s regal experiment as the concluding fiasco. During those years, China had tried out different political regimes, seeking to determine which was most suitable. Each experiment attracted loyal followers, enthusiastic supporters, and of course vicious enemies. History had chosen Yuan as the national leader. Unfortunately for him, he embarked on a one-way path, through Western style republicanism, centralist authoritarianism, and hereditary monarchy. This three-part journey mapped China’s history of clinging to outmoded traditions in the face of revolutionary change. People often ask: What would have happened had Yuan not declared himself emperor? Certainly, history is based on facts, not surmises. China without the Hongxian Monarchy might have been more stable, more prosperous, and perhaps more authoritarian; or there might have been little difference, given that China had already begun to fragment; or China might have gradually achieved constitutional rule, as many expected. That said, Yuan’s monarchy reshaped China’s path, and his death ensured the coming of a new age.

Yuan’s death brought the short, transitional era to an end. As Luo Baoshan argues, the anti-Yuan war was a double-edged sword: it ended Yuan’s imperial endeavour, but it also broke the long-standing historical precedent of a strong central government.¹⁰⁸ After Yuan’s failure to re-establish the monarchy, except for the fleeting Qing restoration by Zhang Xun in 1917, not a single Chinese politician dared to pursue the imperial title, no matter how powerful he might be. The ignominy suffered by Yuan served as a stark warning. This can be seen as a major shift in modern China, for the central government likely would have become a target of public rage if a national leader ever again pushed for dynastic rule. Yuan’s failure represented a breakdown in the relationship between the central government and the provinces: the country was no longer cemented together. The central government had lost face and turned into a straw man, a powerless apparatus fronting for “independent” provinces.

Those subnational territories brought forth provincial strongmen, who ruthlessly exploited local resources to build their power bases. National leaders always set out to consolidate the central government, but now, in China, they had to coordinate with provincial leaders instead of merely directing a subordinate cohort of local power seekers. In this sort of milieu, whoever possessed weapons and wealth could control local or even national politics. Had Yuan lived longer he would have been doubly exasperated that his efforts to stabilize the country through the imperial system had not succeeded; he had bequeathed to his country the warlord era with all the fragmentation that entailed. Indeed, China gradually slipped into an inferno of constant civil war. The failure of Yuan's imperial project was a humiliating tragedy for him and a sorrowful catastrophe for his country.

Conclusion

If biography is the prism of history, as vividly expressed by Barbara W. Tuchman (1912–89),¹ then Yuan Shikai's life presents a kaleidoscope of China's transition from empire to republic. Yuan was born a decade after the Opium War and grew up in an era of cultural clashes between East and West. At the same time, China was enduring violent internal tumults. As the ancient civilization found itself hammered by the rising West and pounded by emerging domestic rebellions, Yuan witnessed foreign invasions, domestic uprisings, baby steps at modernization by some elites, and a rapid shift in power from China to Japan in East Asia. Yuan's life mirrored those changes and epitomized China's quest for modernity. His life was tied closely to this broad national historical evolution; among the vast number of players during this transitional period in Chinese history, today he occupies a special niche. Indeed, to explore Yuan's life is to try to understand modern China.

Strangely enough, Yuan Shikai did not rise to national prominence by the traditional path; rather, each national or international tumult presented him with yet another rung up the ladder of power. Around the time of his birth, the Taiping and Nian rebellions brought the rise of local, powerful families, including Yuan's; these created a network that Yuan later employed. In the ensuing self-strengthening movement, the rulers endeavoured to learn from the West but at the same time tried to reinforce their control over China's tributary states, and this offered Yuan a chance to rise in Korea. He then played a key role in national modernization by training China's first modern army. Although he "betrayed" the

reformers in 1898, he continued to carry out his reforms in the decade to come. The Boxer Uprising allowed Yuan to display his administrative skills and military talent in the process of crushing the disturbances in Shandong. The late Qing was a time of diverse approaches to modernization during which modernizers of many stripes emerged. Thus, Yuan Shikai was a conservative modernizer, while Hong Xiuquan was a religious modernizer, Kang Youwei an ideological modernizer, and Sun Yat-sen a revolutionary modernizer. Each of these modernizers left an indelible mark on the country, but only Yuan expanded his influence to ultimately become the national leader, before his fatal mistake brought about his downfall.

Yuan's life reflected China's modernization. However, his personal experience should not be demarcated solely by national historical events; rather, it followed the most important turning points in his own life, which can be partitioned into several periods. His childhood and youth between 1859 and 1881 determined his future path. Because he failed the Civil Service Examination, he was deprived of the traditional path towards officialdom. This was why he joined the army. His years in Korea from 1882 to 1894 laid a foundation for his steady promotion. His years training the modern army from 1895 to 1899 helped him build his future power base. From 1899 to 1908, he was a high-ranking Qing official: governor of Shandong, then governor general of Zhili, and finally minister of foreign affairs. His "retirement" temporarily ended his political career, but the 1911 Revolution offered him a new opportunity. From 1912 to 1916, he enjoyed the highest position possible in China as the first president of the newly established republic. All these periods can be further subdivided, but any subdivisions should follow the important events of his life. Whatever system of periodization is used, the purpose should be to help demonstrate that Yuan was a key transitional figure during an extraordinary age.

Unquestionably, Yuan was a man of unique talent and ability during that time of transition. Unfortunately, his uniqueness was long viewed through a negative lens owing to twentieth-century political circumstances that have blackened his name in the collective memory and distorted his accomplishments. The positive side of Yuan's story remained to be told in full. In the twenty-first century, China has left its tumultuous revolutions far behind, primary sources have become available, and we can no longer ignore Yuan's positive role in the shaping of modern China, nor can we continue to maintain the previous subjective judgments of him.

Yuan Shikai should be seen as a modernizer, albeit a conservative one. Compared to those who preceded him, such as Lin Zexu, Yuan engaged with the outside world. He vigorously trained China's first modern army, providing it with advanced weapons, and wholeheartedly adopted the Western-style military system. More importantly, he played a role in technological advancement, educational and legal reforms, cultural learning, and much more. He also contributed to constitutional reform during the last years of the waning Qing Empire. These efforts amounted to no less than an extreme reordering of the old system, even though his intention was to preserve the existing imperial polity.

Paradoxically, Yuan Shikai became a player in the "bloodless" revolution and the ensuing relatively peaceful regime change during the dramatic months from late 1911 to early 1912. Drifting away from his original project to defend the Qing, he supported the founding of a republic. At this crucial time, he became the regime's gravedigger, burying the Qing dynasty alive while granting the abdicator favourable privileges. At the same time, he played the role of midwife, delivering the first republic in East Asia while reaching a compromise with the revolutionaries. In this extremely complicated process, everyone expected Yuan to become a great national leader. Unfortunately, he proved a disappointment, because in unifying China under a central government, he accumulated power in his own hands to the point that he was reviled as a dictator. Yet it is safe to assume that this transition from empire to republic might have been much bloodier, more violent, and more unpredictable without his involvement.

Yuan Shikai's presidency has been viewed as a dark age, but a careful analysis of the political, social, economic, and cultural changes during this period presents a different picture. While Yuan was president, most newspapers published freely, civilian organizations mushroomed, and individual opinions spread. China's economic growth was astonishing, and historians view this period as the beginning of a golden age of Chinese capitalism. Was this related to Yuan's long-sustained efforts to promote entrepreneurship? Some argue that the booming economy was the result of dwindling pressure from Western powers, which had plunged themselves into the First World War. That said, Yuan's efforts to promote economic growth were at least partly responsible. The great irony here is that the New Cultural Movement, which drastically reshaped traditional culture, classical language, and outdated thinking to form a new culture, a vernacular language, and rational thought, started under Yuan's presidency. Religious faiths enjoyed unprecedented

growth, and fervent converts multiplied. Yuan's actions attest to his venture to concentrate power in his own hands, but they never amounted to totalitarianism. The looser atmosphere under Yuan perhaps was an important factor in spurring economic growth, cultural advancement, and social improvement.

Twentieth-century publications often depicted Yuan Shikai as a political tyrant; seldom was he viewed as an honest official. Nevertheless, his personal conduct deserves attention. When he was president – and even earlier, when he was a governor or governor general – he surrounded himself with well-educated men of talent who had earned high degrees or who had studied abroad in Japan or the West. Yuan made full use of their talents and abilities. Even though he never obtained a degree himself, he was able to convince those degree holders to respect the wisdom of his decisions and to appreciate his judiciousness. He refused to use his power to offer official positions to his family members, even when the latter lodged private protests against him.² His sons, brothers, and relatives never grew wealthy through his help, even when he was the top leader of the world's most populous nation. In other words, Yuan almost never engaged in favouritism or nepotism.

Yuan Shikai encouraged entrepreneurship, but he himself was not a venal official with an insatiable greed for money from the public coffers. Never did his personal rivals or political enemies denounce him for avarice, even when they condemned him as power-hungry. Amid the turmoil during the transition from empire to republic, Yuan could have abused his power for personal gain, but he did not. At the end of his life, he left only a twenty-dollar bill in his pen container. After meticulous accounting, his friends and family found that his total assets amounted to two million dollars, including monetary investments, fixed assets, built property, and farmland. Given that Yuan as president had an annual salary of nearly half a million dollars, the total value of his assets could not possibly qualify him as a corrupt official; this sum was less than the estate holdings of one of his subordinate officials.³

One legacy Yuan Shikai left to modern China is often referred to as military power politics. Many scholars have branded him a warlord, and the era that followed his death is termed the Northern Warlord Era (*Beiyangjunfashidai*). Indeed, he rose in tandem with his military power and governed the country partly through his army. In a particular sense, Yuan's control of the Beijing government validates the maxim that political power comes from the barrel of a gun. But to label Yuan a warlord is historically inaccurate. A warlord is a military man who controls a region

without respecting the central government; by contrast, Yuan's political vision was anything but regional, and his overriding concern was to consolidate his power over the entire country. Had Yuan lived longer as president, and had he not attempted to establish the Hongxian Monarchy, he might have changed the national situation and the warlord era might not have developed. To argue in this way is not to deny that Yuan injected military power into his political machine.

Yuan Shikai's enduring legacy can be seen in the Chinese rejection of imperial power, largely because his move towards monarchy brought furious repercussions, fierce protest, and violent opposition. With Yuan's lesson as a tragic precedent, any such attempt to re-establish a monarchy was henceforth doomed to fail. Even Zhang Xun's plot to restore the former emperor Puyi in 1917 was not tolerated. Any effort towards constitutional monarchy, a Western type of democracy, was also taboo thereafter. This does not mean that democracy had taken root in Chinese soil; it meant only that the Chinese did not want to turn the clock back. Although different theories of democracy were formulated, the idea of constitutional monarchy was out of the question. However, regal power without the royal title has not completely vanished. Chiang Kai-shek's authoritarianism and Mao Zedong's totalitarianism were more dominant than Yuan's power. No wonder some scholars use the term "people's emperor" to describe those who hold actual royal power in the name of serving the people.⁴ Since Yuan Shikai's death, ambitious politicians have often risen to become hypocritical and duplicitous tyrants, a phenomenon that may continue to recur.

Yuan Shikai was not a revolutionary; indeed, at first he was a counter-revolutionary. Compared to Sun Yat-sen, who was a revolutionary modernizer, Yuan was a conservative modernizer. Sun developed a systematic theory of the Three People's Principles: nationalism, democracy, and people's welfare.⁵ In contrast, Yuan was not a theorist and did not fashion a structured theory. In his mental world, Confucian-style stability, social hierarchy, and communal order were the foremost priorities. Nevertheless, he wanted to make China stronger and more prosperous. Like Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and other Nationalist leaders, he intended to modernize the upper social structure, reform the top layer of the political machine, and build a new national economic structure. His policies did not deeply touch the vast majority of Chinese; they did not call for land reform and other grassroots measures. In a particular sense, Yuan symbolizes the incomplete transformation of early-twentieth-century China with regard to social reform, political change, and cultural advancement.

The fact that Yuan was not a good guardian of the first republic does not mean we should demonize him. The long-held negative view of him – the one familiar to most Chinese to this very day – was generated by partisan political accusations. After Yuan's death, and especially after Chiang Kai-shek's seizure of power, Yuan retained his villainous status in official histories. In this regard, he was different from other political figures. For example, Chiang Kai-shek was condemned by the Communist Party as a "public enemy," yet he remained the venerably wise guardian of Nationalist China. Mao Zedong was portrayed as a vicious bandit by Chiang Kai-shek but hailed as the great leader of Communist China. In contrast, Yuan's generals did not support his monarchism. Sadly enough, Yuan was left an orphan in China's political landscape.

Even worse, Yuan Shikai's name became synonymous for treachery, double-dealing, and tyranny. Chen Boda wrote his biography of Yuan Shikai in 1946 to serve as a tool for Communist political propaganda. He did so on the eve of the Chinese Civil War, with the intent of tarring Chiang Kai-shek as a Yuan Shikai-type politician. That is, Yuan was to be a useful political metaphor in the propaganda war against Chiang Kai-shek. Chen wrote:

Yuan Shikai died early thirty years ago. However, as a political figure, this man is quite frequently mentioned. He indeed died, but his ideological and political spirit has been revived by his successor. As a political symbol, Yuan Shikai remains alive in politics and weighs heavily in the minds of the Chinese people. As a result, the current Yuan Shikai is far worse than the deceased Yuan Shikai in terms of employing brutality and conspiracy ... Yuan Shikai in new dress has been resurrected ... The new Yuan Shikai adroitly reuses and highly develops all of the Old Yuan Shikai's tricks, schemes, strategies, and slogans ... The new Yuan Shikai inflicts more sufferings on the Chinese people and brings in new yet unmatched catastrophes to the Chinese nation.⁶

The Yuan metaphor continued in China's political culture even after Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China. Whoever was identified as a double-dealing traitor was labelled a new Yuan Shikai. During the Cultural Revolution, the historical Yuan was used to target enemies. For example, a big character poster that appeared on September 14, 1967, at Qinghua University in Beijing used Yuan to assault a political rival. The author bluntly tagged Tao Zhu, a follower of Liu Shaoqi, as a "Yuan Shikai-Type Person," because Tao Zhu "wrestled away the fruits of

the Cultural Revolution.” Yuan Shikai was condemned as “the epitome of counterrevolutionary double-dealing ... with special ‘cleverness’ and ‘tricks,’ ... Yuan Shikai seized the political power of the Qing Dynasty, wrestled away the fruits of the Revolution of 1911, and built up a feudal empire in the blood of noble-minded revolutionaries – the Yuan Shikai Empire.”⁷ According to the author, Tao Zhu endeavoured to do just the same. Of course, this allegation was groundless, its discourse was illogically baseless, and its rhetoric was purely political.

During the long, dubious practice of reviling Yuan Shikai, the people who perhaps suffered most, both politically and psychologically, were Yuan Shikai’s family members. Yuan’s children and grandchildren who lived through those turbulent years were suspected of being counter-revolutionaries, charged with hiding evidence, and accused of behaving incorrectly. Some of his descendants were subjected to labour reform simply because of their blood tie. In particular, during the Cultural Revolution, when family background took on great importance, the Yuans were “deeply impacted” (*chongji*), and some even died as a result of persecution.⁸ Only after Yuan’s grandson, the famous Chinese American scientist Luke Yuan, with his wife Wu Jianxiong, visited China in 1973 on Zhou Enlai’s invitation, were Yuan Shikai’s descendants rehabilitated and treated fairly.⁹

Without a doubt, Yuan Shikai left a deep lesion on the national psyche that took decades to heal. It will take decades more for the scar to vanish, if it ever can. At least, to the satisfaction of impartial Clio, the wound is becoming a scar. As China embraced reforms under Deng Xiaoping, a fresh view of Yuan began to emerge. Three decades of books and articles have started a Yuan Shikai fever. The stereotype of him has been dropped, and he is no longer universally demonized. Instead, a far more objective assessment of him has begun to develop. Today he is seen as a reformer who contributed to modernization and as a key figure in the years when China changed dramatically from empire to republic.

In China’s transition from empire to republic, Yuan was both a symbolic representative and a national mogul. His role in that transition was so crucial that his name will continue to live on, be it negatively or positively, in the historical annals of China, East Asia, and even the world. His image will be problematical, for he can be viewed from several different angles. His great merit lies in his contributions to modernization; his liability lies in his monarchical endeavour. It will continue to be debated how much damage he inflicted on the Republic of China. Some scholars may maintain that his bad works outweighed his good ones and that he

should continue to be seen as a quasi-villain. Perhaps the previous historical assessment will endure, because people have viewed him through a obscured lens for so long. Fortunately, people have begun to recognize that total acceptance of a monolithic image is detrimental and that a more generous approach is better. In this new century, a more objective view of Yuan will continue to emerge. This biography is intended to encourage such an endeavour towards an unbiased assessment and an impartial evaluation.

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Notes

ABBREVIATIONS

HGWX	<i>Huguowenxian</i>
HGYDZLXB	<i>Huguoyundong ziliao xuanbian</i>
KYWZLJ	<i>Kang Youwei Zhenglunji</i>
LBSPD	<i>Luo Baoshan pingdian Yuan Shikai handu</i>
NEYZLMYSK	<i>Nueryanzhonglingmian Yuan Shikai</i>
RADZJ	<i>Rong'andiziji</i>
YSKQJ	<i>Yuan Shikai quanji</i>

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Li Zongyi, *Yuan Shikai zhuan* [Biography of Yuan Shikai], 1–4.
- 2 Luo Baoshan, *Luo Baoshan pingdian Yuan Shikai handu* [Luo Baoshan's comments on Yuan Shikai's correspondence] (hereafter LBSPD), 1.
- 3 Huang Yi, *Yuanshidaoguoji* [Records revealing the way Yuan Shikai usurped the nation], 23.
- 4 Bai Jiao, *Yuan Shikai yuzhonghuaminguo* [Yuan Shikai and the Republic of China], 320.
- 5 Chen Boda, *Jieshaoqueguodadao Yuan Shikai* [An introduction to the national usurper: Yuan Shikai], 3.
- 6 Yuan Kewen, *Huanshangsicheng* [Private records of Huanshang], 1–5; Yuan Jingxue, *Nueryanzhonglingmian Yuan Shikai* (hereafter NEYZLMYSK), 41, 89.
- 7 Shen Zuxian and Wu Kaisheng, *Rongandiziji* [The records by Yuan Shikai's students] (hereafter RADJZ), 1–10.
- 8 Zhang Yan, “Minguo waijiaojia de duteshijiao” [The special perspective from a diplomat of the Republic of China], 56, 58.
- 9 Tang Fuxiang, *Waiguoren yanzhongde Yuan Shikai* [Yuan Shikai in foreigners' eyes], 104, 127–28.

- 10 He Dajin, “Xinhaigemingshiqi xifangchuanjiaoshi dui Yuan Shikai dexuanzhe” [The support from foreign missionaries to Yuan Shikai during the 1911 Revolution], 56–59.
- 11 Hu Suping, “Meiguo chuanjiaoshi Li Jiabai dui Yuan Shikai jixinhaigemingdetaidu” [The attitude of Gilbert Reid to Yuan Shikai and the 1911 Revolution], 195.
- 12 Zhang Yongdong, *Bainianzhuyuan* [Righting a hundred-year wrong], 7.
- 13 Chen, *Yuan Shikai*. This book was originally published by George Allen and Unwin in 1961 with the title *Yuan Shikai (1859–1916): Brutus Assumes the Purple*.
- 14 Young, *The Presidency of Yuan Shih-kai*; MacKinnon, *Power and Politics in Late Imperial China*.
- 15 Su Quanyou and He Kewei, *Yuan Shikai zhuan* [Biography of Yuan Shikai], 1.

CHAPTER 1: AN ELITE CLAN

- 1 Perry, “Worshippers and Warriors,” 4.
- 2 Hsiao Liu, “The Social Background,” 14.
- 3 Hou Yijie, *Yuan Shikai quanzhuan* [The complete biography of Yuan Shikai], 2.
- 4 Zhang Huateng, “Xiangcheng Yuanshidajiazu” [The big Yuan clan of Xiangcheng], 17.
- 5 Wang Zhonghe, *Yuan Shikai quanzhuan* [A complete biography of Yuan Shikai], 4–5.
- 6 Ma Haizhen, “Yuan Shikai yuguxiang Xiangcheng” [Yuan Shikai and his hometown Xiangcheng], 38.
- 7 R. Keith Schoppa, *Revolution and Its Past*, 11–12.
- 8 *Xiangchengxianzhi* [Gazetteer of the Xiangcheng county] 26, no. 1 (Republican Period Edition, 1912–49).
- 9 Yuan Shikai, “Zishu ‘Wuxujilue’hou” [Self-introduction to the brief records of “the 1898 Incident”], October 10, 1898, in *Yuan Shikai quanji* (hereafter YSKQJ), vol. 4, 304.
- 10 Yuan Shikai, “Zhierzihan” [Letter to second-eldest], December 11, 1883, (YSKQJ), vol. 1, 27; Yuan Shikai, “Zhimuqinhan” [Letter to mother], August 6, 1887, YSKQJ, vol. 1, 364.
- 11 Chiang Siang-tse, *The Nien Rebellion*, 4.
- 12 Jia Shucun, “Dui Yuan Jiasan jiazudekaocha” [An inquiry into Yuan Jiasan’s family], 33.
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CHAPTER 8: DISMISSAL AND RECLUSION

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CHAPTER 9: THE 1911 REVOLUTION

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CHAPTER 12: “EMPEROR”

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CONCLUSION

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Glossary

Baibi	败笔
Banlichaoxianshiyi	办理朝鲜抚辑事宜
Baojing'anmin	保境安民
Baominzhengzhi	暴民政治
Baoweituan	保卫团
Beiyangdachen	北洋大臣
Beiyangjituan	北洋集团
Beiyangjun	北洋军
Beiyangjunfashidai	北洋军阀时代
Beiyangliuzhen	北洋六镇
Biao	标
Bingbu	兵部
<i>Bingluelucun</i>	兵略录存
Bushezui ren	不赦罪人
Buwuzhengye	不务正业
Canzhengyuan	参议院
Changbeijun	常备军
Chongji	冲击
Chou'anhui	筹安会
Chuantongdiguozhuyizhe	传统帝国主义者
Chubao'anliang	除暴安良
Chunzhen	春賑
Dade	大德
Dafu	大夫
Dagongbao	大公报
Daguo zhuyi	大国主义
Daoguo	盗国
Dayong	大勇
Dazhi	大智
Dazongtongxuanjufa	大总统选举法
Dianbaofang	电报房
Dichu	嫡出

Dingweizhengchao	丁未政潮
Dingwujun	定武军
Dongfang zazhi	东方杂志
Dongling	东陵
Dongnanhubao	东南互保
Dongsansheng	东三省
Dui	队
Dufuminzei	独夫民贼
Duli' nengli	独立能力
E' nuhanpu	恶奴悍仆
Erchongwaijiao	二重外交
Fangde	防德
Fanmianlishirenwu	反面历史人物
Fengshui	风水
Fengtan	奉探
Fubikuang	复辟狂
Gaehwadang	开化党
Gongtongdaode	共同道德
Guizishou	刽子手
Guo'ensanshi	国恩三世
Guochaozhong'en	国朝重恩
Guomindaibiaodahui	国民代表大会
Guowuqing	国务卿
Guozei	国贼
Heli	合力
Hongxian	洪宪
Houbeijun	后备军
Huangzuneige	皇族内阁
Huanyingtuan	欢迎团
Hubu	户部
Huguoyundong	护国运动
Huiban	会办
Huijiao	悔教
Hunchengneige	混成内阁
Huzhao	护照
Imo	壬午
Jiangjunfu	将军府
Jiangmenhuzi	将门虎子
Jianmindaomai	奸民盗卖
Jiansheng	监生

Jiao'an	教案
Jiaosheguan	交涉官
Jiecaicaijun	节次裁军
Jinbudang	进步党
Jinshi	进士
Jinwujiang	进无疆
Jiulu	旧律
Jizhen	急赈
Jizi	积资
Juanna	捐纳
Jugongjin	鞠躬尽瘁
Jun	军
Junwuyuan	军务院
Juren	举人
Kailishidaoche	开历史倒车
Kaique	开缺
Keju	科举
Kapsin [Jiashen]	甲申
Laoji	劳绩
Lianbingchu	练兵处
Liang	两
Lifayuan	立法院
Lixingkangzheng	理性抗争
Lizeshanfang	丽泽山房
Luanchenzeizi	乱臣贼子
Luandang	乱党
Luhaijundayuanshuaibanshichu	陆海军大元帅办事处
Lujunbu	陆军部
Luying	绿营
Mengzangyuan	蒙藏院
Minde	民德
Minjun	民军
Minli	民力
Minzhi	民智
Mofantuan	模范团
Nonghui	农会
Nongwuju	农务局
Pai	排
Panguozuiren	叛国罪人
Peng	棚

Pingzhengyuan	评政院
Poge	破格
Puzhen	普赈
Qiangxuehui	强学会
Qieguodadao	窃国大盗
Qing	卿
Qingshiguan	清史馆
Qinminguan	亲民官
Qitong	奇痛
Quangzhongci	劝忠祠
Quanmianpairi	全面排日
Rencaineige	人才内阁
Runan jun	汝南郡
Sadaedang	事大党
Sanduan	三端
Shangwujingshen	尚武精神
Shangwuguan	商务馆
Shanhoudajiekuan	善后大借款
Shao	哨
Shaoshubaomin	少数暴民
Sheng'ensanshi	圣恩三世
Shenjingshibao	盛京时报
Shi	士
Shiganjia	实干家
Shiye	实业
Shuchu	庶出
Shuntianshibao	顺天时报
Sijutouxuanyan	四巨头宣言
Songshansiyou	嵩山四友
Suzhengting	肃政厅
Taguo	他国
Taishanghuang	太上皇
Tanya	弹压
Taoruoliuqiang	汰弱留强
Tonghak	东学
Tuidaishu	推戴书
Tuiwei	退位
Waiguo	外国
Waiwubu	外务部
Wan'ezhiyuan	万恶之源

Wanguomiezhong	亡国灭种
Weigonghe	伪共和
Wenmiao	文庙
Wo	倭
Wuguoyangmin	误国殃民
Wuqishanfang	无欺山房
Wuweiyounjunxianfengdui	武卫右军先锋队
Wuxujilue	戊戌记略
Wuxuliujunzi	戊戌六君子
Wuxuriji	戊戌日记
Xiangjun	湘军
Xiangtuan	乡团
Xianzhishi	县知事
Xie	协
Xingyingwubeixuetang	行营武备学堂
Xinhaigeming	辛亥革命
Xinjianlujun	新建陆军
Xinzheng	新政
Xiucai	秀才
Xubeijun	续备军
Xunjingbu	巡警部
<i>Xunliancaofaxiangxitushuo</i>	训练操法详悉图说
Xuweiyidai	虚位以待
Yangshouyuan	养寿园
Yeshi	业师
Ying	营
Yingyuanju	银圆局
Yiweidaju	以维大局
Yongying	勇营
Yuandatou	袁大头
Yuandu	袁毒
Yuan'e	袁恶
Yuanlin	袁林
Yuanni	袁逆
Yuanshijia shuxunyan	袁氏家塾训言
Yuantoubi	袁头币
Yuanzhai	袁寨
Yuefahuiyi	约法会议
Zhejianlun	摘奸论
Zhen	镇

Zhengshitang	政事堂
Zhengzhihuiyi	政治会议
Zhiben	治本
Zhibiao	治标
Zhifei'anmin	治匪安民
Zhizhengzhe	执政者
Zhonghuadiguo	中华帝国
Zhonghuaminguoyuefa	中华民国约法
Zhongshukezhongshu	中书科中书
Zhuanshansharen	专擅杀人
Zhuanzhibaojun	专制暴君
Zhujianjiefang	逐渐解放
Zhuzhachaoxianzonglijiaoshetongshangshiyi	驻扎朝鲜总理交涉通商事宜
Ziqiangjun	自强军
Zishou	自首
Zitui	自退
Zizhengyuan	资政院
Zongshedang	宗社党
Zuikuihuoshou	罪魁祸首
Zuiliangguohui	最良国会
Zuji	足疾

Index

Note: “Yuan Shikai” is used for main entries and is abbreviated as “YS” in subentries and sub-subentries.

- abdications, 156–62, 218, 222
- Agricultural Bureau, 113
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