

The Politics of Rights and the 1911 Revolution in China

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The 1911 Revolution overthrew Manchu rule, ushering in the Republican era in China. As Xiaowei Zheng indicates at the beginning of this book, the traditional historiography on the 1911 Revolution focuses largely on the political dimension. Some stress the role of the Tongmenghui, the predecessor of the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party), in launching the revolution, while Marxist historians have tended to explain it as a bourgeois revolution against the feudal rule of the Qing dynasty. Another approach positions the revolution in the framework of social history, examining how political elites redefined the relations between the central and local governments. The third perspective draws on modernisation theory, regarding the revolution as an attempt to build a modern nation-state. However, none of these studies have discussed in detail the significance of ideas and culture in mobilising the masses and shaping the path of the revolution, and Zheng's monograph is therefore a timely intervention to complement and transcend the existing literature.

In recent years, the 'New Cultural History' has begun to influence the historical study of the late Qing and early Republican periods, placing the focus on ideas, media, rituals, discourse, symbols, ceremonies and so on. Xiaowei Zheng's monograph, following this approach, explains the origin and significance of the revolution in a novel and convincing way. Zheng argues that the year 1911 marked the birth of a new political culture which for the first time propagated in China new ideas and discourses on rights, equality, constitutionalism, and popular sovereignty. Together with the new culture came the new rule of political games and new sources of political legitimacy, empowering the local elites who rebelled against the establishment and achieved mass mobilisation. The attempt by the central government to nationalise the Sichuan railway was therefore seen as an encroachment against the rights and interests of the people, who rose to fight against the authorities. With many other provinces joining the rebellion, the Qing government came to an end.

Antedating Zheng's book, Joan Judge, Henrietta Harrison, and David Strand have produced excellent studies on early 20th-century Chinese history, elaborating respectively the role of the prevailing print culture in forging a new political culture, the rise of a nationalist culture in everyday life, and the emergence of public political speaking in late Qing and early Republican China. However, Zheng has distinguished herself by tracing how abstract and important political theories and concepts like constitutionalism and political rights from the Western world were discussed and accepted by Chinese intellectuals during the late Qing period

and later channeled into mass revolution mobilisation.^[1] [2] Locating her study in a single province, Sichuan, the first to initiate the rebellion, Zheng is able to deliver an exhaustive case study which reveals both the dissemination of the new ideas among elites and the lower people, as well as the process from political philosophy to political mobilisation.

At the start Zheng observes that during the Taiping Rebellion in the 1850s and 1860s, local elites – gentry and landowners – in Sichuan loyally supported the Qing regime and voluntarily organised corps to fight against the rebellion, while 50 years later it was these pillars of the empire who actively overthrew it. She then argues that it was the changing political culture among the local elites that turned them from devoted subjects into determined insurgents.

Tracing the thoughts of political elites like Pu Dianjun, Luo Lun, and Zhang Lan, the book successfully shows their close intellectual connection with the great Chinese thinker Liang Qichao. The second chapter devotes considerable space to discussing the introduction of Western political concepts into Chinese cultural circles in the late Qing period, including ideas relating to the rights of the people, popular sovereignty, and liberty. Following the path paved by Wei Yuan, Feng Guifen, and Kang Youwei, Liang is treated in the book as a systematiser. Zheng finds that Rousseau's theory on the rights of the people occupied a very high position in Liang's thoughts, and it was here that constitutionalism and the rights of the people genuinely converged and intertwined. Meanwhile, the Department of Law at Hosei University where Pu Dianjun studied was deeply immersed in the French liberalist tradition, in contrast to most other universities where the German tradition dominated. Popular sovereignty and republicanism thus further took root in Pu's mind. Here Zheng makes an interesting argument that there is a basic difference between China and the West in terms of the understanding of constitutionalism. An integral aspect of Western constitutionalism lies in its limit and balance of the political power, while Chinese intellectuals learn from it an expansion of the people's rights and the achievement of popular sovereignty. The book investigates Western political ideas in a comparative perspective, focusing on their different connotations in different historical and political contexts.

This book wonderfully bridges intellectual and cultural history, tracing in detail the process by which abstract political philosophy was later transformed into accessible political culture among the people. Zheng elaborates on how local elites linked Western concepts to indigenous thought, and how this contributed to the gradual formation of Sichuanese identity. Enlightened by David Kertzer's classic *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, Zheng offers excellent examples of how cultural resources and historical figures in China were exploited to endow Western political ideas with new meanings in the local cultural system.^[2] [3] Once these ideas were integrated, a new ideology gradually formed, different from the original Western constitutionalist theories as well as the old political culture in Sichuan. The political obligation of the people thereby quietly turned into political rights. When the central government tried to nationalise the Chuan-Han Railway Company which had been largely financed by private capital, both the elites and ordinary people in Sichuan firmly rejected the demand. The railway protection movement later provoked the 1911 Revolution and led to the collapse of the Qing regime.

The many contributions of this book are somewhat tempered by a few shortcomings. One issue is that the theoretical connotations and distinctions of Western political concepts like 'rights', 'equality', 'popular sovereignty', 'democracy', 'republicanism', and 'constitutionalism' are not made sufficiently clear, especially when the author further examines these terms in a non-Western context, making their discussion even more complicated. In the second chapter, the book meticulously scrutinises the political thought of several distinguished Chinese thinkers in the late-19th century – especially Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao – on the rights of the people, equality, and constitutionalism. Nevertheless, when it comes to the Sichuanese constitutionalists like Pu Dianjun, Deng Xiaoke, Luo Lun, and Zhang Lan, the protagonists of this study, Zheng's description and analysis is somewhat cursory. Pu Dianjun's academic connection with the French legal tradition of Hosei University may be an exception, but the ethos inside the university occupies more pages than Pu's own thought. Zheng presents readers with the impression that these Sichuanese intellectuals were obsessed with the concepts like equality, popular sovereignty, and people's rights and wholeheartedly

admired Liang Qichao's constitutionalism. This narrative could use further complication, especially concerning how these Sichuanese students digested and re-understood these concepts and theories in the context of Japan and China, which were quite different from Europe. Pu Dianjun and other Sichuanese intellectuals had gained high degrees in the civil examinations prior to their study in Japan, and the ways in which they adapted the new ideas to their existing framework and combined this with their observations of Japanese society merit further discussion.

Zheng argues that the majority of 'commoners' in Sichuan were touched and mobilised by the outcry from the elite for 'rights', but this contention would have benefitted from further evidence on how the masses across Sichuan understood and responded to the call. The 'voices from below' in this study are often too faint and vague to be compelling. This can partly be attributed to the limitations of historical materials that disproportionately show the thoughts and ideas of major figures, but studies like Wang Di's monograph on the history of street culture in Sichuan have shown the possibilities in this regard.^[3] [4]

Zheng observes that the local elites in Sichuan showed their strong loyalty to the court when facing the Taiping Rebellion in 1850s and 1860s, but in the early-20th century they rose to fight against the Qing regime. She explains the contrast by arguing that a sense of 'rights' and 'equality' began to prevail among the elites who no longer felt obliged to serve the government, and were even driven to challenge its legitimacy. This explanation does not take full account of the different strategies adopted by the Qing government. During the Taiping period the government had to rely heavily on assistance from local elites to suppress the rebellion, and accordingly granted them more autonomy. In contrast, in the early 1900s the central government took a hardline stance towards the elites and severely harmed their interests. Even so, as Zheng concedes, the first step taken by the local gentry and merchants in 1911 was not a radical rebellion but a moderate request for negotiation with the government. However, in spite of the sympathy and pacification policy shared by Governor-General Zhao Erfeng and many other magistrates, the central government still harshly urged them to crush the protest immediately, which ultimately led to the 7 September Chengdu Massacre and the subsequent radicalisation of the entire movement. In other words, if the court had agreed to make certain compromises, both the attitudes of the local elites and the consequences may well have been different. Given the significant differences in the conditions between the Taiping Rebellion and the 1911 Revolution, Zheng's explanation risks overestimating the importance of the new political ideas.

These issues notwithstanding, *The Politics of Rights and the Chinese 1911 Revolution* is a valuable contribution to the field due to its excellent combination of intellectual and cultural history with local materials. The book shows a deep understanding of the changing political culture in early 20th-century Sichuan and is surely an outstanding monograph for anyone interested in revolution, political transformation, and political ideas in modern China.

^[1] [5] Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: 'Shibao' and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China* (Stanford, CA, 1997); Henrietta Harrison, *Inventing the Nation: China* (New York, NY, 2001); David Strand, *An Unfinished Republic: Leading by Word and Deed in Modern China* (Berkeley, CA, 2011).

^[2] [6] David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, CT, 1988)

^[3] [7] Wang Di, *Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space, Urban Commoners, and Local Politics, 1870-1930* (Stanford, CA, 2003)

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