

**Revolution?: A Review Essay on China, 1898-1912:
The Xinzheng Revolution and Japan,
by Douglas R. Reynolds**

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In China 1898-1912: The Xinzheng Revolution and Japan (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1993), Douglas R. Reynolds carefully documents the important last decade and one-half of Manchu imperial rule, making references to all of the major secondary material on the subject--Chinese, Japanese, and English. This prodigious synthetic work was foreshadowed by Reynold's earlier and excellent studies on this subject, notably "A Golden Decade Forgotten: Japan-China Relations, 1898-1907," and "Training Young China Hands: Tōa Dōbun Shoin and Its Precursors, 1886-1945."¹ In addition to the extensive amount of research Reynolds has done, he has also attended a number of conferences in China and Japan with an increasingly coherent group of Asian and American scholars committed to the emerging and important field of Sino-Japanese studies.

Not only is Reynolds deeply committed to this field of study; his enthusiasm for his subject is so intense that the reader can almost taste it. It is refreshing to read a work presented with such passion. Reynolds makes (and remakes) several points which are important to setting the Chinese historical record straight. First, and most obviously, he underlines the fact that Chinese history in this period can only be fully understood if China's close relations with Japan are taken into account. He documents in detail the various dimensions of these relations--educational, military, legal, constitutional--and gauges their linguistic, political, and social impact. Second, he points to the important role of the reformers, a group of movers of history in the late imperial period who have been largely overlooked in the literature in favor of the revolutionaries. It is this author's view, also, that it was the reformists, not their radical contemporaries, who laid the semantic, political, and social groundwork for the 1911 Revolution.

Reynolds is so anxious to make his important points, however, that he often overstates his case. The most problematic issue is his claim that the Xinzheng reforms in the early twentieth century constituted a revolution. In terms of semantics, Reynolds argues that revolution should not be "narrowly defined as a disorderly and uncom-

promising rejection of the past" (194) but in the Kuhnian sense as "radical change in the structure of the way things are perceived" (12). The term is clearly defined in the Random House College Dictionary, however, if not as "a forcible overthrow of an established government or political system of the people governed" then as "a complete, pervasive, usually radical change in something, often one made relatively quickly." Does this apply to China in the early twentieth century? Reynolds himself seems to equivocate by qualifying the term, in some instances calling the Xinzheng reforms a "conservative revolution" (148) or by suggesting that they represented a "quiet revolution" (12). In so doing he dilutes the very meaning of the term.

A further argument against its usage is that the Meiji Restoration, which the early-twentieth-century Chinese reforms were modeled on, despite Reynolds protestations to the contrary, was not considered to be a revolution either by the Meiji reformers themselves or in the eyes of later Japanese historians. Considering that the changes which took place in Meiji Japan were much more far-reaching in their long-term social and political impact, it hardly seems justified to label China's more moderate effort with a more radical epithet.

The substance of the matter is, however, more important. Reynolds claims that "institutionally [the Xinzheng reforms] transformed Chinese governmental organs and the laws and institutions that shape state and society, shifting away from long-established indigenous patterns to ones based upon external models" (193). He seems to contradict himself, however, when he admits that Chinese organizational patterns cannot be studied as carefully as those of Japan because in "China, the institutional and organizational elements borrowed from Japan, though surviving, managed to do so only amid political and social turmoil which prevented their maturation" (170). Can both of these statements be accurate? Did the new reforms radically transform society and the polity, or were they thwarted at some level of development before reaching full "maturity?"

Two specific examples suggest the latter. The Xinzheng reforms did not lead to the promulgation of a constitution which would radically alter the structure of the late dynastic polity. They merely led to the publication of a constitutional draft, the Principles of the Constitution (Qinding xianfa dagang 欽定憲法大綱) on August 27, 1908. The full-scale constitution was to be promulgated in 1916. Efforts by non-governmental reformists to speed up the constitutional process by, for example, presenting three successive and increasingly pressing petitions for the rapid opening of the national assembly,

were largely ignored by the authorities. Before the Principles were implemented in any significant way, the dynasty had fallen. Since the late Qing, ten successive and often quite distinct constitutions have been instituted in China which hardly suggests that a stable constitutional order was firmly put in place by the changes during the Xinzheng "revolution."

Reforms in local self-government, a subject Reynolds does not address, also failed to reach "maturation." The inspiration for these reforms was clearly Japanese. The term for self-government (zizhi 自治) was adapted from the Japanese term (jichi) and many of the elements of the 1888 Japanese self-government code were later integrated into the local self-government regulations promulgated in China in January of 1909.² Both systems were divided into two levels according to population density, and the functions of the city executive council and the deliberative assembly were also almost identical in content and order in the 1888 Japanese and the 1909 Chinese local self-government codes.³

These regulations, however, like so many others drafted at this time, turned out to exist in name only (you ming wu shi 有名無實)-- despite Reynolds claim that "Xinzheng reforms...do not fit the scenario of you ming wu shi" (169). Although the implementation of the regulations did take place in some parts of China between 1909 and 1911,⁴ they were met in several areas with serious popular resistance which impeded their establishment.⁵ By 1913 Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 had abolished self-government organizations altogether.⁶

The figure of Yuan Shikai himself raises a few questions on the subject of "revolution." Yuan is clearly important to Reynolds's thesis, meriting over 30 references in the book and lauded for his Japanese-style educational (83ff), military (157ff), and prison reforms (163ff). As Reynolds notes at one point, "Yuan Shikai is perhaps best remembered for his army reforms...[but] in police work Yuan also excelled"(167). But this same Yuan, who became President of the the Republic after the 1911 Revolution, did everything in his power to squelch whatever seeds of reform had been planted in the Xinzheng era, rapidly dissolving the parliament, abolishing local self-government organs, and shoring up central power. And rather than shift "away from long-established indigenous patterns," Yuan did all he could to restore them by attempting to reinstate the imperial institution with himself as emperor in 1916.

Reynolds and the voices he quotes in the text repeatedly enumerate the reasons that Sino-Japanese cooperation was so felicitous: geographically, culturally, and linguistically there was a proximity between the two nations which facilitated exchange and the Chinese

adoption of the Japanese model. The impression one gets from Reynolds work, however, is that the Chinese reformers represented a monolithic force that realized it would have to make important political changes if the nation was to regain its greatness, and was willing to indiscriminately embrace any model of Japanese reform that would ensure that end. I would argue that the picture was much more complicated. The Chinese reformers--from the official to the unofficial--all had specific agendas in mind and all saw in Japan what they wanted to see. These agendas clearly diverged as the struggle between government reformers and non-governmental constitutional activists was heightened over the issue of centralization in the last Qing decade. And as agendas diverged, so did assessments of the worth of the Japanese model for China.

The issue of the appropriateness of this model became part of a debate between official and unofficial reformists as to whether China should adopt an imperially sanctioned constitution (ginding xianfa), namely, a Japanese-style constitution, or a nationally contracted one (guoyue 國約, xieyue xianfa 協約憲法) which would approximate the American and British models. For the government the Japanese model was particularly attractive because it was a top-down, gradualist constitutional system. Since the Qing government had a high degree of trepidation concerning the delegation of authority to constitutional powers, a 21- or 22-year schedule was most compatible with its own concerns. The content of the Japanese constitution also appealed to the Manchu court, particularly in the paramount position it granted the emperor, the restrictions it placed on the powers of the Diet, and in its recognition of imperial decree as above the law.

Although constitutional reformers outside of government had generally accepted the appropriateness of the Japanese model in the early period of constitutional reform (1904-1907), they had always expressed their concern about officials who would "take some ten articles of the Japanese constitution and claim each of them could be transplanted to China," believing that in so doing "they had fulfilled the final goals of constitutionalism."⁷ By 1908 their arguments against top-down reform were more clearly focused on the issue of a nationally contracted constitution and the establishment of a parliament prior to the implementation of the constitution. "Since the constitution is the basic law of a nation," one reform journalist wrote, "it should be instituted with the full support of the people." Japan, he explained, "did not obtain a perfect constitution," because its assembly was established after the constitution had been proclaimed, depriving the people of the means to participate in its formulation. The journalist went on to counter the prevailing

official view that the Japanese constitution was most appropriate for China because the two nations shared certain cultural characteristics. "The Japanese are a homogenous race with a single line of emperors for 10,000 generations. Moreover, prior to the abolition of the shogunate and the organization of the new government, they did not have a legacy of governmental problems as we do in our nation today."⁸

The story of the last Qing decade and one-half lies in this kind of debate over the nature of reform, and in the underlying principles that led certain actors to advocate certain models at certain times. Reynolds has made a significant contribution to the field in demonstrating that China historians of this period can no longer dismiss the Xinzheng reforms as a failure. He does not do the era justice, however, by claiming it represents an unmitigated success or that the Japanese model was regarded as a panacea by all Chinese reformers. It seems almost condescending to suggest that China's reform efforts would have failed without Japan's guiding example as Reynolds does, for example, when he states that without "Meiji Japan's Kanji-based modern vocabulary, fully standardized and functionally coherent by the 1890s, China's every effort at reform would have foundered on terminological battles and bickering" (195, emphasis mine).

The importance of this period lies less in the debt China owes to Japan or the successful grafting of Japanese reforms onto the late imperial Chinese political structure than in the tensions, compromises, debates, and negotiations between individuals uniformly committed to reform but representative of different political orientations and diverse social strata. It is these tensions which reveal the most about China's efforts to leave its dynastic past behind and become a strong and unified nation. Many of these compromises and negotiations foreshadowed on-going struggles over reform and revolution in China throughout the twentieth century.

Reynolds does note at several points in the book and in his conclusion that more research needs to be done to flesh out the impact that the reforms, which he so excellently documents, had on the diverse levels of society. This would inevitably lead to a more nuanced and fuller picture of the era. His suggestions for research directions are all timely and important ones, and we can only hope that with his knowledge and expertise on this period and on Sino-Japanese relations that he will be one of the first to lead the way.

Notes

1. "A Golden Decade Forgotten: Japan-China Relations, 1898-1907," The Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan, 4th series, 2 (1987), pp. 93-153; "Training Young China Hands: Tōa Dōbun Shoin and Its Precursors," in The Japanese Informal Empire in China, 1895-1937, ed. Peter Duus, Ramon H. Myers, and Marc R. Peattie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 210-271.

2. The term jichi itself had been introduced to Japan by a Prussian who had been invited by Yamagata Aritomo 山縣有朋 to help draft the 1888 Japanese local self-government code. Philip A. Kuhn, "Local Self-Government under the Republic: Problems of Control, Autonomy, and Mobilization," in Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China, ed. Frederic Wakeman, Jr. and Carolyn Grant (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 270-72.

3. Roger Thompson, "Statecraft and Self-Government: Competing Visions of Community and State in Late Imperial China," Modern China 14.2 (April 1988), p. 216.

4. Thompson, p. 211.

5. See, for example, Wang Shuhuai 王樹槐, "Qingmo Jiangsu difang zizhi fengchao" 清末江蘇地方自治風潮 [Late Qing Local Self-Government Disturbances in Jiangsu], Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindai shi yanjiusuo jikan 中央研究院近代史研究所集刊 6 (1977), pp. 313-27.

6. See, for example, Ernest P. Young, The Presidency of Yuan Shikai: Liberalism and Dictatorship in Early Republican China (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976), pp. 148-52.

7. "Xianfa jieshuo" 憲法界說 [Definition of Constitutionalism], Shibao 時報, Dec. 16-17, 1906.

8. Min 民 [psued.], "Lun yubei lixian shidai zhi renmin" 論預備立憲時代之人民 [People of the Period of Constitutional Preparation], Shibao, May 27-June 1, 1908.