

# The 1911 revolution: dividing historians

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



The 1911 Revolution is an event which continues to divide historians.

Debates rage as to whether it was truly a revolution, whether it was an event or part of an ongoing process, and whether it was merely a military coup or truly paved the way for socialism to flourish in the world's most populous nation. These questions are relevant to the issue of whether the 1911 revolutionaries had a coherent plan as to how to politically structure China had their mission to take power been successful. Many believe the revolutionaries to have had little idea as to how to govern and structure China, the revolutionaries' support being based on nationalism and anti-Qing fervour as opposed to a solid manifesto of ideas as to how the country should be governed. Some historians maintain however, that the revolutionaries did have ideas and intentions about governing the country, though these obviously did not come into fruition as planned. The primary intention of the revolutionaries was to rebuild China as a republican state, and position it as the high point in the development of democracy. Whether these intentions were truly realistic or merely a utopian dream can be debated, but their intentions were relatively clear.

What is certain is that the 1911 revolution was underpinned by a strong anti-Qing spirit which had captivated almost all of the Chinese heartland. The imperial system of the Qing dynasty was largely considered to be anachronistic, and as the revolution occurred, only the Northern rural states of China remained loyal to the Qing.[1] A sense of nationalist revolutionary zeal captivated the country, as it became apparent that the era of empire had come to an end, and regarded that the Manchus were no longer fit to rule China. Whether one belongs to the revolutionary school of thought

which sees the revolutionaries as heroes sacrificing themselves and struggling against the odds, the Marxist school of thought which sees the revolution as ‘ a “ bourgeois” phase of rebellion against a backward and “ feudal” monarchical despotism,’ or the Western school of thought which regards the revolution as a phase of conservative social change, there is no denying that the primary motivation of the revolutionaries was to overthrow the Qing dynasty, the emperor and his courts.[2]The long term goal of the revolutionaries was always to overthrow the Manchu ruled Qing empire, and they used significant nationalist rhetoric to voice their antipathies, terming the Manchu rule, ‘ the national disgrace,’ and vowing ‘ to restore the Chinese.’[3]This was the primary political intention of the 1911 revolutionaries, and with such an explicit goal, it seems almost unthinkable that the revolutionaries did not have a realistic plan as to how to govern the country and lay the political structure in the event that their mission to overthrow the Qing empire was successful. In reality of course, while the dynasty fell, the Emperor was removed and his courts abolished, many aspects of governmental structure remained in place, and ‘ many of the old Qing bureaucrats simply stayed in their jobs.’[4]The imperial political structure may have collapsed, but the revolution ultimately failed to produce a new and effective political system, which is something of a paradox given how strongly the revolutionaries were committed to overthrowing the Qing dynasty. Whether they truly had a coherent plan as to how to structure the nation politically is questionable, and the historical consensus is that they did not, and were perhaps more divided than united, with the main source of unity within the Revolutionary Alliance coming from a nationalistic desire to

overthrow the Manchu rule of the Qing, rather than a consensus as to how to structure a replacement government.

The Revolutionary Alliance, or Tongmenghui, was an amalgamation of various anti-Manchu groups that had existed previously, largely made up of radical students, intellectuals and anti-Manchu elites. The organisation was never truly united however, with members being loyal ‘not to the central leadership but to the local leaders of the various regional groups... the looseness of the structure inevitably encouraged a factionalism that was further compounded by ideological and political struggles.’[5]The alliance was internally divided, being ‘dominated by rivalries between provincial factions and by personality clashes,’ which invariably made decision making and ideological direction extremely difficult.[6]When the decision was made by Japanese students to appoint Sun Yat-Sen as president of the alliance in 1905, it was made on the expectation that his experience and relationships would bring stability to the party. In reality, ‘far from identifying with the party, Sun Yat-Sen tried to make the party identify itself with him.’[7]Ultimately, while Sun Yat-Sen emphasised the name of the Revolutionary Alliance when making deals, his appointment did little to unite the movement, and if anything divided it further by creating another faction, and presenting a further alternative methodology.

With relevance to political intentions however, the Revolutionary Alliance were, to a large extent, united by a desire to bring a Republican form of government to China as opposed to the imperial model in place under the Qing dynasty.[8]This was ‘central to their demands,’ and thus while it is true

that the alliance was highly divided by factionalism and internal disputes, the desire to establish a republican form of governance was a central demand which united the movement.[9]The idea of bringing a democratically elected republican form of governance to China was conceptualised by Sun Yat-Sen in his philosophical work the Three Principles of The People, the second of which was democracy.[10]The Three Principles were first mentioned by Sun Yat-Sen in 1905, the same year the Revolutionary Alliance was founded, and ‘ in the years leading up to the 1911 revolution, the doctrine of the Three Principles of the People was diffused by the People’s Journal and became the charter of the Revolutionary Alliance.’[11]In the manifesto of the Revolutionary Alliance from 1905, a republican form of government is one of the four main policies of the party, and in the later revised version of the Three Principles, Sun states, ‘ Our Revolutionary Party advocates a struggle, not for liberty and equality, but for the Three Principles of the People. If we can put these Three Principles into practice, we will have liberty and equality. True liberty and equality stand upon democracy and are dependent upon democracy,’ an impressive illustration of how committed the revolutionaries were to the Three Principles.[12]The manifesto states, ‘ Now our revolution is based on equality, in order to establish a republican government. All our people are equal and all enjoy political rights. The president will be publicly chosen by the people of the country. The parliament will be made up of members publicly chosen by the people of the country.’[13]From the very start of the Alliance, the concept of republican democracy was deeply entrenched, to the extent to which their manifesto stated, ‘ A constitution of the Chinese Republic will be enacted, and every

person must abide by it. Whoever dares to make himself a monarch shall be attacked by the whole country.’[14]The aim of the manifesto was to create a break with the past, and effectively tell China that never again would the dynastic system or a monarchy be restored. In terms of how the new Chinese republic would be structured, the manifesto appears to put forward a system which takes ideas from the American republican system, the British parliamentary system and even Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Social Contract theory. The plan was to implement an American style constitution that all must abide to, with a President and a Parliament to keep each other accountable, and form a system of checks and balances. However, specific details about how these institutions would be structured and how they would function are somewhat lacking to say the least. Granted the manifesto was written in the year the Revolutionary Alliance was created, but it is nevertheless extremely vague with regards to the specific details of how republicanism would be implemented. Despite this, it is clear that from the very earliest stages of the Alliance that a republican form of democracy was at the very forefront of their minds.

Equally at the forefront of the revolutionaries minds however was the third of the Three Peoples Principles, the principle of livelihood, or socialism.

[15]Establishing a republican form of government was one of the four points of the 1905 Manifesto of the Revolutionaries, but another of the points was equalizing land ownership. From the earliest stages of the T’ung Meng Hui, a commitment to socialism was present, with the ultimate aim of creating ‘ a socialist state, where each family within the empire can be well supported, each person satisfied, and no one fail to secure employment. Those who

dare to control the livelihood of the people through monopoly shall be ostracized.’[16]From the very origins of the party, the commitment to socialism was present, with the plan being to ‘bring about proportional distribution of the land.’[17]However, an understanding of Marx at the time was limited, with the 1906 Chinese translation of The Communist Manifesto being far more poetic and less violent than the German and English translations.[18]The famous conclusion to the Communist Manifesto, ‘The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!’ emerged in Chinese as ‘Then the world will be for the common people, and the sounds of happiness will reach the deepest springs. Ah! Come! People of every land, how can you not be roused.’[19]Sun Yat-Sen himself acknowledged that the theory of socialism had only recently become known in China, and that its ‘chief advocates usually limit their knowledge of this tendency to a few empty words, without having any definite programme.’[20]However, while knowledge of socialism at the time was relatively limited, the Revolutionaries, and Sun Yat-Sen himself had quite possibly the most detailed understanding of the subject, with in depth plans of how to organise a socialist society discussed in both the 1905 Manifesto and the Three Principles of the People. The Revolutionaries were ultimately an amalgamation of various ideologies, and while they believed in establishing a republican form of democracy, they were also committed to equalising the distribution of land and eradicating inequality within society. Both were highly institutionalised within the alliance.

With the principle of a republican form of democracy so deeply entrenched within the alliance, the question which follows is why was this form of government not implemented swiftly, and why was Yuan Shikai able to seize power and establish a dictatorship? In truth, while the Three Principles did form the framework of the Revolutionary Alliance, only the first principle of nationalism was 'unanimously accepted by the revolutionaries,' largely because at the time it was understood as 'opposition to the Manchu dynasty,' which all those joining the revolutionaries were in favour of.

[21]While most members of the Revolutionary Alliance were 'completely committed to the idea of a republican revolution,' the movement was not entirely united by a desire for republicanism. There were others within the alliance who 'were drawn to terrorism and preached the use of assassination,' and others still who saw the alliance's aims as being primarily economic, with the intention to release China from 'the economic stranglehold of the West and Japan.' [22]The alliance was an amalgamation of people with various ideologies, many of whom saw the alliance as having primarily non-political functions, though while a republican form of government did not entirely unify the movement, the majority of its members were committed to republicanism, so the view that such a government was not implemented because the alliance was divided is insufficient by itself. The question that follows is whether within the alliance there was enough expertise with regards to both republicanism itself and governing a state as large as China.

As mentioned previously, the manifesto of the Revolutionary Alliance in 1905 preached republicanism, but was vague on the specific details, and there is



little evidence to suggest this situation had changed by 1911. Sun Yat-Sen, ' despite his vague planning and many failures... was kept going by his energy, persuasiveness, and the virulence of his hostility to the Qing,' in other words, his skills as a leader were based more upon charisma than experience, his ability to inspire rather than his expertise.[23]Ultimately though, to suggest Sun Yat-Sen's vagueness and lack of a developed plan for implementing republicanism was the reason it was not implemented swiftly is grossly unfair. Indeed, the plan all along had been to implement a fully fledged republicanism only after experiencing prior stages of martial law and military government. The implementation of republicanism was the third stage in an ongoing process, which shows that Sun was conscious that republicanism could not be implemented overnight.[24]The plan was to implement republicanism nine years after the initial removal of the Manchus, a significant, but necessary gap between the old and new regimes. The significance of nine years may have come from the Japanese example, ' for in 1881 the Meiji emperor had promised a parliament for 1890,' a Prime Minister in actuality being implemented a year earlier than expected in 1889. [25]Sun Yat-Sen had always proposed a three stage process of establishing a republic in China, ever since the Manifesto of the Revolutionary Alliance in 1905. During the first stage of military law, the military government would ' lead the people in eradicating all traditional evils and abuses,' and in the second they would ' give the power of local self-government to the people while retaining general control over national affairs.'[26]This idea of the revolution occurring in stages appears to be heavily influenced by Marxism, and the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat.[27]For both Marx and

Sun Yat-Sen, a transitional stage of dictatorship was necessary before the respective dreams of a Socialist or Republican state could be realised.

However, the stages of martial law and military government did not really occur as Sun Yat-Sen expected, and to understand why, the historical course of the 1911 revolution must be examined.

The Revolution itself did not go as Sun Yat-Sen had planned, largely due to the fact that he was not present in China as events unfolded; instead he was 'on a fund-raising trip in the United States.' [28] Rather than being able to oversee the events as they unfolded, he only found out about the revolution that he had spent so long trying to initiate 'in a newspaper on a train outside of Denver.' [29] No senior members of the Revolutionary Alliance were present at the time, and thus when the revolutionaries gained control of the city of Wuchang, where the revolution began, on the morning of October 11th 1911, they had no leader! With Sun Yat-Sen in America, the temporary centre of the 1911 Revolution was established in Chicago, where Sun stated that, 'the revolutionary adherents in Chicago expected the overthrow of the Chinese dynasty and the establishment of a provisional republican government.' [30] This suggests that although Sun was out of the country, he still expected the revolution to be a success in terms of bringing republicanism to China. The early stages of the revolution were successful in military terms for the revolutionaries, and 'the battle results showed strong anti-Qing winds, with defeat following defeat.' [31] As the revolution progressed, 'New Army troops were joining the old scholarly gentry, rich merchants, and returned students from Japan to declare the beginning of the republic,' and by the end of November 1911, 'fifteen provinces had seceded

from the Qing dynasty.’[32]Conflict continued however, and with Qing loyalists and revolutionaries still embroiled in conflict, the decision was made in early December 1911 to offer Yuan Shikai the presidency of the new Chinese republic. The decision was made by Huang Xing, who was effectively Sun Yat-Sen’s co-leader during the revolution, and is crucial in terms of explaining why a republican form of government was not implemented in China following the 1911 Revolution. Yuan Shikai was the most powerful Qing official at the end of the dynasty, and was extremely influential in implementing both domestic and military reforms during the final decade of Qing rule.[33]While not a Manchu, he was highly significant in the Qing Empire which the revolutionaries were so desperate to abolish, and yet still got offered presidency of the new republic on a plate. The historical consensus as to why this happened was, ‘ the revolutionaries agreed to this in order to stop the fighting as quickly as possible to forestall the possibility that foreign powers in their treaty ports and concession areas might take advantage of the unrest to increase various kinds of imperialistic pressures and demands.’[34]The decision was somewhat rushed, and in terms of implementing a functioning, efficient republican system of government, is probably the most significant mistake the revolutionaries made. While the threat of foreign imperialist powers taking advantage of China’s position was a realistic possibility, Yuan Shikai ultimately never supported a system of republicanism, and so as China entered a new era in its history in early 1912, it did so with a ruler who was an official in the government the revolutionaries had worked so hard to remove.

As we now know, this arrangement did not work, and Yuan Shikai's legacy is one of almost universal condemnation, being regarded as a traitor to the revolution by Chinese Marxist historians, and gaining the title of "father of the warlords." [35] However, at the time he did receive praise, with the American ambassador to China, Paul Reinsch, reporting that he was, 'very cordial and genial in his manner... nothing escapes his eye... he evidently has a grasp and mastery of details.' [36] There is also little doubt that he was a strong character, and one of the failures of the revolutionaries is their inability to convince Yuan to push forward with their 1905 manifesto demands. A primary issue was the fact that very few official positions were given to revolutionaries, and those that were, were relatively insignificant posts. The revolutionaries missed out on 'crucially powerful posts like minister of finance or minister of the army,' and the token positions given to Revolution Alliance members were epitomised as 'Sun Yat-Sen was named national director of railroad development.' [37] Yuan's political ideals were 'order, control and rigid devotion to regulations,' which raised conflict with the republican political system he inherited, which he saw as being 'too messy, too disorderly, too spontaneous and so completely unpredictable that it could not in reality serve as a solid base on which to build the reforms that would make a new China.' [38] Whether he favoured a strong centralised government because he truly wanted to be able to pass reforms swiftly that were in the national interest or merely just wanted to gain as much power as possible is debateable, but what is certain is that he did not favour a system of republicanism with political parties, and representative bodies at national, provincial and county levels, and this was shown as he abolished all

assemblies in 1914, a year after Song Jiaoren, party leader of the Guomindang (the political party which arose out of the Revolutionary Alliance) was assassinated on his way to form the first government of republican China, under highly suspicious circumstances.[39]

While China's first experiment with democracy was a failure, had it not been for the assassination of Song Jiaoren and the establishment of Yuan Shikai's dictatorship, the subsequent history of China may have been considerably more stable, peaceful and secure. Nevertheless, with relevance to the revolutionaries' aims to structure the country, much can be learned from China's brief flirt with a republican form of democracy. The revolutionaries' plan, according to their 1905 Manifesto, had of course been to establish a republican form of government in China in three stages, but the immediate establishment of assemblies, political parties, and an American style Congress suggest that in practice the stages of martial law and military control of government had effectively been skipped. Of course, martial law could be implemented from above by a political party in control of the military, but the fact that National Assembly elections in 1912 happened in the first place suggest that this was not the plan. And while not favoured by Yuan Shikai, assemblies were established, albeit briefly, and a fully partisan political system of democracy and national elections was put in place. While several restrictions on who was eligible to vote were present, this short period was, in terms of political freedoms, the most liberated the people of China had ever been.[40]

In terms of Guomindang party policy at the time, it is unlikely that the party produced an election manifesto with policy pledges for the 1912 elections, and therefore perhaps the closest thing to a contemporary Guomindang manifesto is the 1923 rewriting of Sun Yat-Sen's famous work, *The Three Principles of the People*. In terms of the political intentions of the post-1911 revolutionaries, the second chapter on democracy sheds light on the ideal form of republican democracy they were aiming for, and it was a system, not just of democracy, but of a very direct democracy in which the citizenry had extensive rights in terms of influencing domestic politics. On the system of representative democracy, established in France, America and England following their respective revolutions, Sun states, 'nevertheless that system does not mean direct and equal rights for all citizens, such as we are fighting for to-day.'<sup>[41]</sup> For Sun, there were 'four fundamental clauses' which constituted what he saw as 'direct electoral right,' and those were, 'the franchise for all citizens,' which certainly was not the case in the 1912 elections, 'the right of recall,' meaning that officials elected by the people could be dismissed by them at will, 'the right of referendum,' which would come into effect when the legislative body passed a law 'contrary to the wishes of the citizens,' and finally 'the right of initiative,' which meant the citizens could propose draft laws, 'to be carried and adopted by the legislative body.'<sup>[42]</sup> This shows that the dream Sun Yat-Sen had was to transform China into not only a republican democracy, but into a radical and innovative form of direct democracy. Sun speaks highly of Switzerland in this work, and admires it for being an example of a nation of mingled races, united despite linguistic and ethnic differences.<sup>[43]</sup> With regards to its

democracy however, he states, ' As regards democracy I have already said that in Switzerland democracy has reached its highest point of development; but at the same time the system of representation prevailing there does not constitute real democracy, and only the direct right of the citizen fully answers to the requirements of democracy.'<sup>[44]</sup>Sun therefore had the very ambitious plan of establishing China as the new high point in the development of democracy. Furthermore, he advocated a very different way of establishing democracy than Western nations had previously done.<sup>[45]</sup>For Sun, the people of China ' must realize that political democracy is not given to us by nature; it is created by human effort,' and in the context of China, this meant that the Guomindang, ' must create democracy and then give it to the people, not wait to give it until the people fight for it.'<sup>[46]</sup>This is in contrast to Western nations, which he sees as generally having to fight for democracy through revolutionary struggle. The radical view put forward by Sun is that the Chinese must differentiate between sovereignty and ability, something the West failed to do, leading to an attitude of hostility to government. What this meant in practice was, ' the foundation of the government of a nation must be built upon the rights of the people, but the administration of government must be entrusted to experts. We must not look upon these experts as stately and grand presidents and ministers, but simply as our chauffeurs, as guards at the gate...' which meant that sovereignty was in the hands of the people who could remove their elected leaders at any point, but those with the vision to lead the country had the ability to do so.<sup>[47]</sup>This was a radical and new work in the realm of political philosophy that for Sun, would avoid the issues of hostility towards

democracy that Western states faced. While there is an issue of context in comparing Sun Yat-Sen's 1923 work to the works that inspired the revolutionaries prior to the 1911 Revolution, it is of course worth remembering that it is a new, or rather a final version of the 1905 Three Principles of the People, and therefore the same ideas are prevalent, and thus provides a good understanding as to what the revolutionaries would have planned to do had the revolution gone to plan.

One issue that arises when examining Sun's plans to implement referenda, the right of recall and the right of initiative to China is the issue of feasibility, in other words whether such plans could be implemented in a country as vast as China. Many will look at the plan of organising a referendum involving an electorate of nearly four hundred million and claim that it is simply impossible to organise a vote on such a large scale, especially when the frequency of referenda may occur whenever the populous are significantly opposed to a government policy. The administrative costs of organising votes on such a scale, potentially on a regular basis, would inevitably be astronomical. Similarly, the issue of deciding which issues were selected for initiative would be difficult to implement fairly, and even implementing a system of recall for locally elected representatives would be costly in a state as vast as China. In short, it is difficult to see how these radical direct democratic initiatives could be implemented efficiently in a nation as large as China.



Ultimately the political intentions of the revolutionaries failed to come into fruition due to events in the course of the revolution, primarily the mistake made in giving Yuan Shikai th