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HIS 369
12/12/2018
Final Research Paper

The Shortcomings of the Philosopher President: Sun Yat-sen's Provisional Presidency of 1912

As the twentieth century began, the Qing dynasty found itself besieged by foreign powers. Critically examining these powers, such as the United States and Great Britain, Chinese thinkers found themselves in a paradox regarding the country's future. On one hand, China could adhere to Confucian tradition, rebuke Western ideals, and maintain its distinct culture. On the other, these foreign nations had swept into China, pillaged its treasuries, and slaughtered its armies. These nations clearly had great power, which some argued stemmed from their modernization and political structure. To modernize, these would-be revolutionaries thought that the country should adopt Western principles. In 1905, one of these revolutionaries, an idealist named Sun Yat-sen, proposed his "Three People's Principles," namely "nationalism, democracy, and the people's livelihood," to bring China into the modern age. In the coming years, he sought to make these ideals a reality, and for a brief time, he had an opportunity to do so.

After the 1911 Revolution, Sun served as the provisional president of the new Republic for three months. Although his tenure as provisional president was short, it could not have come at a more crucial moment— an interim between the end of a dynastic tradition and hopefully the beginning of a republican one. Soon after becoming president, however, he turned power over to Yuan Shikai, a powerful military leader. Sun's provisional presidency is often perceived as a brief, symbolic administration devoid of practical implications, and Sun is generally seen as an idle figurehead rather than a real leader with influence and autonomy during this time. This narrative, however, fails to capture both the nuance of the situation and the complexity of Sun as an individual. Undoubtedly, Sun's authority and reputation amongst fellow revolutionaries led to his election. During the provisional presidency, Sun tried to lay the groundwork for a modern

constitutional republic centered around the “Three People’s Principles,” but failed due to the broader political uncertainty brought by Yuan’s presence. When Yuan took power, Sun initially supported his administration, but soon he became frustrated with Yuan’s increasingly autocratic decisions. Sun’s political involvement, then, did not cease with the end of his presidential term; instead, he was politically active and even belligerently idealistic until Yuan forced him into exile in 1913.

When Sun first published his “Three People’s Principles,” he offered a bold new blueprint for the future of China. In a 1906 speech in Tokyo, Sun articulated that the three principles of nationalism, democracy, and “the people’s livelihood” were to guide China into the modern age, along with a constitution to serve as the republic’s foundational legal document. First, he argued that ethnic nationalism should inspire a revolution, appealing to the Han population. He said, “Once we Han unite, our power will be thousands of times greater than theirs, and the success of the nationalist revolution will be assured.”¹ In a biography of Sun, Marie-Claire Bergere clarifies that this nationalism was not directed against Western powers, but rather the Manchu, who Sun saw as the true oppressors of the people. Second, Sun argued that a democratic revolution must occur simultaneously with nationalist fervor. He wrote, “We must carry out a popular revolution that will lead to the creation of a government of the people.”² Explaining this choice, Bergere comments that Sun thought a republic was the most modern and therefore the most effective form of governance.³ Third, Sun emphasized the importance of the “People’s Livelihood,” or socialism. He recognized growing wealth inequality and sought to

¹ Sun Yat-Sen, “The Three People’s Principles and the Future of the Chinese People,” *Prescriptions for Saving China: Selected Writings from Sun Yat-sen* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1994), 42.

² Sun, “The Three People’s Principles,” *Selected Writings* 44.

³ Marie-Claire Bergere, *Sun Yat-sen*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 162.

remedy the plight of the poor through land redistribution.⁴ Finally, he explicated the importance of a “five-power” constitution; it would include a separation of powers, civil service examinations, anti-corruption measures, and both a legislative and executive branch.⁵ Heavily influenced by American and British constitutions, Sun saw value and power in the nations who had dominated China.

With these ideas in mind, Sun rose to take power as the Qing dynasty became weaker and weaker. Interestingly enough, however, he was not in China as the anti-Manchu revolution began in October of 1911. Sun’s own Revolutionary Alliance had failed to overthrow the Manchu almost six months earlier, and he was abroad gathering funds that October. Instead, the insurrection that sparked the demise of the Qing occurred in the city of Wuchang, and it was incited by accident. On October 9, a bomb exploded in a revolutionary warehouse, drawing unneeded attention and causing government officials to storm the location and seize some insurgents. Other revolutionaries responded with violence, and enough dissatisfied Qing soldiers took their side that a temporary military government overpowered the Manchu officials in the city.⁶ This new government declared provincial independence from the Manchu capital in Peking, though it lacked any leadership structure. Initially, it was quite hectic, described as a “headless dragon,” but soon, Song Jiaoren and Huang Xing, two influential revolutionary figures, took hold of the situation.⁷ News of the Wuchang Uprising diffused throughout the country, and revolution quickly gripped China.

As initial reports from Wuchang came to him, Sun was in Denver, Colorado. There, he was raising funds for revolutionary activities, and one day in October, he received a telegram

⁴ Sun, “The Three People’s Principles,” *Selected Writings* 46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

⁶ George Mossley, *China Since 1911*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 20).

⁷ Bergere, *Sun Yat-sen*, 208.

from Huang stating that the revolution had begun. Instead of immediately rushing back to China, however, he bought plane tickets to New York and London. Explaining this decision in his *Autobiography*, he wrote, “In twenty days I could land in Shanghai and take part in the revolutionary struggle, but at that point the diplomatic front was more important to us than the firing line. I therefore resolved to address myself to matters of a diplomatic order.”⁸ Though prescient in thought, this mission in practice did not prove diplomatically fruitful. In New York and London, he failed to reach agreements with any leaders. Though he asserted his legitimacy, writing in a memorandum that “there can be no doubt” he would serve as president, foreign leaders did not believe him due to the instability of the country. Refusing to support Sun, one English minister noted that “it was Yuan Shikai who seemed to be the man of the moment.”⁹ This observation would become prophetic in the years to come. Though Sun’s foreign mission was a complete failure for establishing strong ties between foreign nations and the new republic, it still turned out to be quite self-serving in his own political career. Bergere writes that “the rumor of his contacts with Western leaders and other figures of importance bestowed an aura of prestige upon him.”¹⁰ Once he returned to China, he held a certain sway that other revolutionaries did not.

As Sun travelled across the United States and Europe, revolution spread across China like wildfire. Less than two months after revolution had broken out, fifteen of the eighteen essential Chinese provinces had declared independence from Peking. To try to salvage the situation, the Manchu Court brought Yuan Shikai out of retirement, since he was “the only man who seemed capable of leading the imperial armies against the revolutionaries.”¹¹ The Manchu had trusted

⁸ Ibid., 207.

⁹ Ibid., 208.

¹⁰ Ibid., 209.

¹¹ Moseley, 21.

Yuan previously, since he assisted in many efforts to salvage the Qing dynasty. During this final effort, he led an army to fight the rebels, but the result differed from expectations. Due to Western intervention, war turned into negotiations, and by mid-December, the fighting had ceased entirely. The northern provinces, held by the Qing, were represented by Yuan, and the southern provinces, held by the provisional government, were represented by several revolutionary factions. In these negotiations, Yuan took authority over the Manchu court in Beijing, offered to have the emperor resign, and put himself in a position to lead the people once the new government had been established.¹² In the meantime, however, he would remain on the sidelines.

Sun finally returned to China on December 21, 1911. Soon after, the provisional government based in Nanking held its elections for president. On December 29, Sun was elected the Provisional President of the Republic of China by parliament, winning the election 16-1, with each independent province allotted one vote. Sun won because he had been abroad, while much infighting took place, leaving his reputation unscathed by the factionalism that riddled the provisional government. In a statement published on December 30, he offered his hopes for the government. He called for unity within both the Tongmenghui, his revolutionary party, and the new provisional government. He wrote: “We need to be closely united among ourselves, forming a solid and invincible group. When our forces are amassed in strength, many more will be attracted to join us. ‘A tree with dense foliage is an invitation to many birds.’”¹³ This message of unity was inspired by the factionalism within the revolutionary groups. Along with Sun and the Tongmenghui, Song Jiaoren and Huang Xing also held great influence, and they had different views than Sun about the new republic’s direction. Nevertheless, to succeed, Sun argued that the

¹² Paul Linebarger, *Government in Republican China*, Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, 147.

¹³ Sun Yat-sen, “Statement of Proposals by the Tongmenghui [United League],” *Selected Writings*, 57.

provisional government needed to band together. Appealing to his central philosophy, Sun connected his lofty ideals to a practical mission for governance. He wrote:

In the three great principles that our party proclaims... there is a sequence in their implementation, but we will not be able to create a perfect, unified nation and support our critical purpose unless all three of these principles are implemented fully, without exception. It goes without saying, therefore, that our party's responsibility does not end with accomplishing the principles of nationalism, but, rather, with securing the people's rights and the people's livelihoods.¹⁴

As the Manchu had lost power, the principle of nationalism had been established for Sun. This, however, did not mean the revolution was over. Instead, much work remained— democracy was not yet secure, and neither was the “People’s Livelihood.” The party and the government needed to take swift and decisive action to make these ideals a reality.

Sun took office as the provisional president on January 1, 1912. His first act as president was “to lead a procession bearing sacrificial tribute to the tombs of the Ming emperors at Nanking,” ultimately fulfilling the overthrow of the Manchus.¹⁵ That same day, he wrote a message to Yuan Shikai emphasizing the temporary nature of his presidency. Sun wrote, “Although I have accepted this position, for the time being, it is actually waiting for you...I hope that you will soon decide to accept this offer.”¹⁶ This decision may seem surprising, but to Sun, it was only natural. In a 1918 memoir, reflecting back on the decision, he wrote, “I renounced the Presidency, not for fear of the power of Yuan Shikai, but because I could not carry out the tasks of revolutionary reconstruction.”¹⁷ By this, he meant his position and power were undefined and tentative. In the meantime, Sun assembled a cabinet of China’s top officials to begin building up the republic. Aside from this, his only notable accomplishments during January were “the

¹⁴ Ibid., 58-59.

¹⁵ Mossley, *China Since 1911*, 22.

¹⁶ Bergere, *Sun Yat-sen* 219.

¹⁷ Sun Yat-sen, *Memoirs of a Chinese Revolutionary.*, 126.

adoption of the solar calendar, and the replacement of the imperial dragons by a flag with five horizontal colored stripes: red, yellow, blue, black, and white.”¹⁸ He sought to efface any remnants of Qing influence from the new provisional government.

Though many knew Sun would not be a permanent president, it seems the exact length of his term remained unknown until February 12, 1912. On that day, Yuan Shikai and the Qing government issued an edict claiming that the emperor Puyi would abdicate his throne immediately. On the edict, an official logo sits between pictures of “President Sun Yat-sen” and “Premier Yuan Shikai,” with the Empress Dowager and the Emperor Puyi pictured atop the page.¹⁹ With this positioning, the edict clearly wanted to demonstrate unity and coherence throughout the transition. (See final page for full image). On February 15, in the provisional capital of Nanking, Sun announced his resignation from the presidency forty-five days after taking power. Soon Yuan would hold the office of president, and the Republic would officially be established. Nevertheless, this change was not immediate. Bergere explains:

[Sun] appended to his resignation a number of conditions: Nanking was to remain the capital, and after his election the president was to come there to take up his functions. Only then would Sun’s resignation take effect. In the meantime, Parliament was to promulgate the Constitution of the provisional government to which the new president would have to swear loyalty.²⁰

Sun sought to check Yuan’s ambition with these two conditions. In time, Yuan would overcome both, but the fact that Sun’s resignation was conditional demonstrates that he did not roll over and immediately submit to Yuan. The battle over the capital city’s location was tenuous. Parliament resided in Nanking and wanted to stay there, and Peking served as the home of the old, detestable Qing court. Nevertheless, Yuan wanted to reside there, and he ultimately

¹⁸ Bergere, 214.

¹⁹ “Abdication Edict,” February 1912, <http://tianjin.virtualcities.fr/Photos/Images?ID=25790>.

²⁰ Bergere, 220.

prevailed. On the same day Sun's delegation arrived to negotiate, Yuan squashed a riot in the city, demonstrating that the president needed to reside in Peking to hold order.²¹ The new center of government would eventually move to Peking, much to the disappointment of Sun and other revolutionaries suspicious of Yuan.

As Sun fought to ensure that the president resided in Nanking, the legislature built a constitution in hopes of limiting Yuan's power. On March 12, the official document was ratified and published. With fifty-six different articles delineating the rights of the people and the powers of the government, the document resembled a mixture of the American and British constitutions. Written with suspicion of Yuan practically built into the document, the constitution named its legislature the "Advisory Council" and gave it the ability to check the president. In Article 33, the Constitution stated: "The Provisional President shall ordain and establish the administrative system and official regulations, but he must first submit them to the Advisory Council for its approval."²² Likewise, in Article 34, it stated the Provisional President "shall appoint and remove civil and military officers, but in the appointment of members of the cabinet, ambassadors and ministers, he must have concurrence of the Advisory Council."²³ Drawing almost directly from American constitutional tradition, the provisional legislature sought to limit the powers of the executive, particularly the ambitious Yuan.

Yuan took power on April 1, and afterwards Sun initially believed that achieving democracy, the second People's Principle, was quite possible despite his previous concerns. Perhaps this came from the stronger constitution passed by the national legislature, or perhaps it

²¹ Bergere, 222.

²² "The Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China." *The American Journal of International Law* 6, no. 3 (1912): 152.

²³ *Ibid.*, 152.

came from the growth in democratic experiments throughout the country. In an article discussing these experiments, Wang Chaoguang notes that:

There were a total of 312 parties at that time, 82 and 80 of which were based in Beijing and Shanghai respectively. According to one study, ‘almost all Western-style parties could be found in China’. Some had the ‘characteristics of being a political party, some were pressure groups formed for a certain purpose and the remaining were alliances of social activists.’²⁴

With such a wide array of opinions, democracy was primed to flourish in parliament. The majority, revolutionary party called the Kuomintang (KMT) formed in the legislature and was led by Song Jiaoren.²⁵ Though they often opposed Yuan, he initially did little to limit their power and influence. After the landslide victory at the beginning of 1913, however, that began to change.

Many narratives argue that during this time, Sun retired from political life.²⁶ While he removed himself from the public eye, he did not stop fighting for his ideas. In the months following his abdication, Sun had continually met with Yuan to develop a plan for building the government.²⁷ Meanwhile, he took part in KMT activities, including speeches, debates, and conventions. Sun diverted his efforts to the third principle, “the People’s Livelihood,” and to accomplish this, Yuan appointed him the Director of Railways in September of 1912. Sun gave a lecture given on September 14, 1912, entitled “Building Railroads across the Nation Is a Matter of Life and Death for the Republic of China.”²⁸ In the lecture, he argued that building railroads and other infrastructure was necessary to create an economy fair to all. Proposing to build over 200,000 miles of railroads, he sought to have them funded publicly but owned privately— but

²⁴ Wang Chaoguang, “Aftermath of the Revolution: Experiments in Western-style Democratic Politics in Early Republican China,” *China Report* 48: 4 (2012): 393.

²⁵ Bergere, *Sun Yat-sen*, 223-225.

²⁶ For examples of this narrative, see Bergere 222-235; Linebarger 148-149; and Mossley 20-25.

²⁷ Bergere, *Sun Yat-sen*,

²⁸ Sun Yat-Sen, “Building Railroads across the Nation Is a Matter of Life and Death for the Republic of China,” *Selected Writings*, 92-98.

after forty years, “the railroads will revert to state ownership.”²⁹ While well-thought out and practical, the projects were never finished due to impending political turmoil.

As Sun sought to build up infrastructure, Yuan began tearing down the republic he ostensibly swore to protect. His decision-making began to disregard the constitution entirely as he sought to consolidate power unto himself. Most importantly, he ordered the assassination of Song Jiaoren soon after Song’s election as prime minister. He was assassinated in a train station on March 19, 1913. With his death, the Republic began to crumble. In April, Yuan unconstitutionally began signing treaties and taking out loans without approval from the Advisory Council. These loans allowed him to build up a strong military to crush any potential insurrections. In June, he removed KMT governors in three provinces: Jiangxi, Guangdong and Anhui.³⁰ When Sun found out about Song’s death, he was in Japan fundraising for his railroad project. Bergere writes that this moment “jolted Sun out of the political passivity into which he had withdrawn the previous spring.”³¹ While “political passivity” mischaracterizes his actions, Bergere’s observation that Sun was “jolted” into action is fair. His second return to China in the midst of revolution would not be nearly as glorious as the first, two years prior.

After Song’s assassination, Sun became a vocal proponent of opposition against Yuan, and the KMT agreed and began to organize against him politically. Sun, however, wanted active, military rebellion, despite other rebels like Huang Xing’s more passive political strategy. Nevertheless, after the removal of the three governors in June, Sun’s opinion prevailed. Wang observes, “On Sun Yat-sen’s insistence, and after thorough consultation among the revolutionaries, a consensus to take military action against Yuan was ultimately reached.”³² The

²⁹ Ibid., 98.

³⁰ Wang, “Aftermath of the Revolution,” 400-401.

³¹ Bergere, *Sun Yat-sen*, 236.

³² Wang, “Aftermath of the Revolution,” 400.

so-called “Second Revolution” began in July of 1912, with Sun Yat-sen as its figurehead. Nevertheless, its actual battles lasted a mere month. Residing with large armies in the north, Yuan simply held more power in a more strategic position. Additionally, he framed these dissenters as rebels against the republican cause who threatened to preserve the peace. The KMT was quickly exterminated, and its leaders evacuated to Japan. Bergere articulates the drama and tragedy of the situation:

By early September, Yuan Shikai had crushed all the rebellions. He crowned his victory by getting Parliament to elect him president for five years and inaugurated his mandate with a dazzling ceremony on October 10, 1913, the second anniversary of the 1911 Revolution. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic, was now nothing but an exile.³³

The mission Sun had set out to accomplish two years ago had now failed entirely. Yuan continued to bring China away from republican ideals and towards authoritarianism, and without much money, an army, or many allies, all Sun could do was watch.

Writing a memoir in 1918, three years after Yuan’s death, Sun offered his insight into why his presidency failed to transform the government into a strong republic. In part, he laid blame on his colleagues, writing, “My ideas were too lofty for the comprehension of my comrades, whose level of political intelligence was too low for that time, and I involuntarily suffered through this.”³⁴ He also recognized how his position limited the achievement of his ideals. Sun noted, “Even if I had continued to be President—it would have been impossible to realise the aims of the Revolution. The result would have been only that the new officials would replace the old, which could scarcely bring China anything new in the sense of a reform of the government or the strengthening of her economic power.”³⁵ Sun’s self-righteous tone here— one of both superiority and infallibility— makes it somewhat difficult to sympathize with his

³³ Bergere, *Sun Yat-sen*, 244.

³⁴ Sun Yat-sen, *Memoirs of a Chinese Revolutionary*, 123.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

shortcomings, but the context of the piece matters. Sun wrote this to explain why the revolution had failed, but at this point in his life, he hoped to lead another one soon. As a result, he needed to demonstrate both ideals of civic virtue and practical abilities to lead. He argued that because of the nature of his position, rather than the nature of his abilities, he could not fulfill the revolution.

Scholars disagree about why this initial experiment in republican democracy failed and Yuan's autocratic regime took hold. Wang points to the difference in mindset between Sun and Yuan: "While Sun was full of ideals and ready to make compromises with his opponents repeatedly, Yuan, a former leading imperial official whose thought and life-style were firmly rooted in the old ways, was very ruthless and believed in using military powers against the revolutionaries."³⁶ Like Wang, Bergere attributes the failure primarily to Sun, writing "The presidency could not, in a month and a half, and lacking the means as well as the time, achieve very much. It would have taken a firmer and more enlightened leadership than Sun Yat-sen's to make the most of the opportunity."³⁷ Regarding the inability to stop Yuan once he had seized power, Mossley lays blame on the KMT. "There was neither money nor popular support for the cause," he observes, "and their military forces were quickly overrun."³⁸ Though perspective regarding blame differs, all consider this first attempt at a republic to be a complete disaster.

Sun continued to be an important figure in Chinese republican statecraft until his death in 1925. His position in history, however, stems from his writings about the "Three People's Principles" and his place as the founder of the Republic. Sun maintains a complex legacy today. To some, Sun was an honorable individual who held great power, but for the sake of the state,

³⁶ Wang, "Aftermath of the Revolution, 404.

³⁷ Bergere, *Sun Yat-sen*, 214.

³⁸ Mossley, *China Since 1911*, 25.

passed it on—a paragon of civic virtue whose actions parallel great founders like Cincinnatus and Washington. To others, he was a figure too caught up with his ideals to see the practical political turmoil developing around him and stop it. Per usual, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Sun undoubtedly held great power and honorably relinquished it, but in the meantime, he failed to utilize such power to build the nation. In part, this was because of his temperament—extremely, even hopelessly, idealistic, while at the same time conciliatory towards foes. Nevertheless, the tension inherent in his position is the true culprit to blame. Had Sun held onto power himself and fought Yuan, he ran the risk of delegitimizing the republic and plunging the nation into further turmoil. Instead, he hoped to bring order and stability through his presidency. Whether or not Sun's decisions were the right ones is impossible to determine. Nevertheless, we see the consequences of his decisions reverberate throughout history: the ensuing Warlord era, the eventual creation of Taiwan, and the complicated legacy he holds today.

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Abdication Edict:



皇太后

宣統皇帝

皇帝辭政上諭



宣統皇帝

The Empress Dowager.

The Chinese Emperor,

隆裕皇太后奉
旨朕奉
命諭旨
前因民
起事各
省
督撫
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孫逸仙





袁世凱

President. Sun-yatsen,

Premier Yuen-Shi-Kai.

The edict of the Chinese Emperor abdication, Feb. 12th 1912,

念紀國民華中和共