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Jim Logan

China's 1911 Revolution

More than a century ago and nearly four decades before the 1949 Communist Revolution, another revolution in China altered the nation's political and cultural landscape. In 1911, reform elites in the Qing empire led an uprising that foregrounded new ideas of rights, equality and popular sovereignty, ending 2,000 years of imperial rule and paving way for the many successful mass movements in 20th-century China.

In her new book, "The Politics of Rights and the 1911 Revolution in China" (Stanford University Press, 2018), Xiaowei Zheng, a UC Santa Barbara professor of Chinese history, describes how the 1911 Revolution transformed Chinese politics and explains how and why it happened. She chronicles the revolution as it occurred in local and regional areas (Sichuan in particular), explores the ideas that motivated the revolution, and gauges their long-term impact on the Chinese people. She also discusses the changes in elite consciousness and how the revolution's leaders publicized their new ideas through new political discourse and mobilization.

"I am fascinated by revolutions," Zheng said. "I am particularly interested in learning about people with ideals trying to change the world. The 1911 Revolution was important in that it overthrew 2,000 years of the imperial dominance in China and established a republic. The old regime lost its legitimacy after 1911. At the same time, the revolution was completely overshadowed by the Communist Revolution in 1949, and its meaning and importance remains obscure until the present day."

Differing from previous studies that emphasized the anti-Manchu sentiment of Han Chinese and the leadership of Dr. Sun Yat-sen and his faction, Zheng's book views 1911 from the perspective of political culture. The 1911 period witnessed the emergence of a new political culture and an unprecedented political mobilization that included mass media, demonstrations and public meetings, all used to expeditious effect in standing up against the Qing government. The new rhetoric centered on the concept of "rights," both political and economic, and was closely linked to the notion of "popular sovereignty." Through passionate pamphlets and mass mobilization, the sense of ownership in public affairs, the belief that the people were stakeholders in the polity and the notion of political participation gained popularity in China.

By the end of the revolutionary decade, Zheng said, Chinese had learned to conduct a new form of politics: the concept of rights had gained currency, ideologies of equality and political participation had challenged the traditional cosmology of hierarchy and harmony, and mass propaganda had been deployed as a powerful tool for political change. Marking the rise of a new political consciousness, thousands of men and women gained firsthand experience in the public arena: they talked, read and listened in new ways; they voted, protested and joined political parties.

According to Zheng, looking at the 1911 Revolution through the lens of political culture reveals the crucial role played by the constitutionalists, who often were well-respected political elites deeply entrenched in local society. In the two decades leading up to the collapse of the Qing, it was this group of men who mobilized political activism; fostered the learning, translation and promulgation of the new, revolutionary ideas; and created schools, legal codes and journals to transform Chinese society. After China was defeated by Japan in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), they sought to learn from Japan and the West, and their ideas on political legitimacy changed, Zheng said; it was no longer all about serving the emperor, which was seen as no longer effective to save China.

"The concept that 'people are the masters of the state' and they have 'rights' were new for the Chinese," she said. "For thousands of years the emperor was the Son of Heaven, whose political legitimacy came from his connection to the divine Heaven." The 1911 Revolution enshrined "people are the masters of the state" — a different kind of political legitimacy. Beginning in 1911, the concepts of rights, equality and popular sovereignty gradually took root in the broader population.

It is precisely the emphasis on equality and popular sovereignty that deepened the revolution's hold further down in Chinese society, Zheng said, leading to the ultimate success of the Communist Revolution in China. For many Chinese political activists, ideas about the people's rights and sovereignty were central to the values and expectations that shaped their intentions and actions. In many ways, the 1911 Revolution inaugurated China's modern era: it was through this revolution that modern Chinese politics has come into being.

While the elites in 1911 popularized ideas of rights and popular sovereignty, the new Chinese republic failed to install a functional constitutional state, Zheng noted. During the revolution, claiming to represent "the people," revolutionary leaders' exercise of power was often oppressive, and the valorization of "public opinion" spawned further scrambles for public office, with all contenders maintaining that they more truthfully embodied "the people." Key constitutional concepts of "separation of powers" and "limited government" were never implemented in any serious fashion, and impassioned public opinion rather than careful institutional design became the main mechanism for realizing political change. "The mechanics of how to make the people the masters of the state," she said, were never settled.

Zheng is exploring the subject further in a second book project tentatively titled, "The Unfinished Mission: Constitutionalism in China," focusing on the Chinese practice of constitutionalism in the early 20th century. "Many people don't know that China had parliamentary elections, between 1912 and 1928," she said. "Chinese legalists tried many times to establish a constitution that gives people rights and the best minds were involved in the constitution project. The question is, why didn't it work?"

UCSB's Department of [History](#) will [mark the publication](#) of "The Politics of Rights" Wednesday, Oct. 17 from 5 to 7 p.m. in the McCune Conference Room (Humanities and Social Sciences Building Room 6020). Matthew Sommer, a professor of Chinese history at Stanford University, will speak about the book's significance for the field of modern Chinese history.

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