As China celebrates the centenary of the 1911 revolution this October Jonathan Fenby reappraises the uprising and argues that its failings heralded decades of civil conflict, occupation and suffering for the Chinese people.

The revolt that toppled the world’s longest-lasting empire had been brewing for decades but, when it finally came 100 years ago this October, it was triggered by accident when a bomb exploded in the office of a group of revolutionary soldiers in the Russian concession of the city of Hankou on the river Yangtze in central China. Russian police arrived to investigate and uncovered a list of the members of the underground cell that was dedicated to overthrowing the ruling Qing dynasty. Since the Russians were likely to hand this over to the Chinese authorities, the revolutionary group was forced to
consider taking action rather than continuing to plot in secret.

Tension had been building in the region between Qing loyalists and those bent on bringing about its fall. This was heightened when, the same day, Chinese police swooped on a meeting place for radicals in Hankou, one of three cities that made up the metropolis of Wuhan together with Wuchang and Hanyang. They arrested 32 people, three of whom were executed in public, in wind and rain, at dawn the next day, October 10th, 1911. In a third incident two soldiers shot dead an officer who questioned them about weapons they were carrying without authorisation. Their colleagues in an army battalion stationed in Wuchang mutinied. China’s revolution had begun. Four months later on February 12th, 1912 the last emperor, Puyi, abdicated; since he had only passed his sixth birthday a week earlier, his adoptive mother, the Empress Dowager Longyu, agreed to the regime change on his behalf.

Failings of the Qing

This October the revolution will be celebrated in both the People’s Republic, which rules mainland China, and in the Republic of China on Taiwan across the 90-mile strait separating the two. A giant portrait of the country’s first republican president, Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), is on display in Tiananmen Square, the heart of Communist China. The regime in Taiwan stresses that it can establish a direct line back to the rebels who ended an empire that dated back to 221 ad and the reign of the first emperor, Qin Shihuangdi.
But that revolution was a far from straightforward process, creating issues that persisted through much of China’s 20th-century history and beyond. One thing is clear, however. By the later part of the 19th century the Qing, whose ancestors had swept down from their homeland of Manchuria in north-east China to unseat the Ming dynasty in 1644, had run out of time and will power.

Their great emperors, notably Kangxi (1661-1722) and Qianlong (1736-95), had presided over one of the most flourishing periods of the 2,000-year empire. They had expanded the country’s frontiers to the borders that encompass today’s China. As well as his military exploits, Kangxi was a cultured and humane ruler, who created an agricultural base to feed the nation’s growing population. Qianlong, who was also a scholar and patron of the arts, undertook massive expeditions to conquer Tibet and to forge into Central Asia. At the time of his reign it has been estimated that China accounted for one third of the world’s wealth. When George III sent a mission to Beijing in 1792 under Lord Macartney the emperor waved aside the products of the Industrial Revolution presented to him as gifts with the contemptuous remark: ‘I set no value on strange or ingenious objects and have no use of your country’s manufactures.’

However the imperial treasury was severely stretched by the cost of Qianlong’s military campaigns, which were increasingly unsuccessful as he aged, by the extravagant expenditure at court including the construction of the Summer Palace outside the capital and the depredations of the emperor’s corrupt favourite Heshan, who was estimated to have accumulated a private fortune.
equivalent of a billion of today’s pounds. At the same
time a huge population boom strained the economy.

Qianlong’s successors were generally an unimpressive lot
and faced enormous revolts spurred by poverty in the
countryside, such as the Taiping rebellion of 1850 led by
Hong Xiuquan (1814-64), a former teacher who said he
was the son of the Christian God, as well as the incursion
of Europeans after Britain waged the First Opium War in
1840-42 in the name of free trade. To defeat the
rebellions the court was obliged to depend on the forces
of the local gentry because the Manchu Banner troops,
who had conquered China in 1644, had become an
ineffective, corrupt elite unable to counter the grassroots
challenges that swept the country between 1850 and
1875. In addition the conservative court, at which the
Dowager Empress Cixi (1835-1908) presided in the
second half of the century, lacked the skills needed to
deal with social change, to bolster the economy and to
handle the modernisation of a country that remained
largely stuck in its past.

In 1894-95 China suffered a catastrophic defeat at the
hands of Japan, which had adopted western military
technology. In 1898 a chaotic attempt at reform by the
young Guangxu emperor Xianfeng was cut short after a
hundred days by his aunt, Cixi; the emperor was kept
prisoner in the Summer Palace thereafter. Two years
later the dowager made a terrible mistake by throwing in
her lot with the rising of the Society of the Righteous and
Harmonious Fists, better known as the Boxers.

Consisting mainly of young men from the disaster-prone
north-eastern province of Shandong, who believed that
their rituals gave them immunity from bullets and that the Christianising westerners must be driven from China, they marched on Beijing and provoked the siege of the foreign legation quarter in the capital. This set off a fresh military expedition by Europeans, Americans and Japanese, which was followed by wholesale murder and looting by the invaders. The Dragon Lady, as the dowager was known, and the emperor were forced to flee the capital to spend 18 months wandering through northern China while the foreigners imposed a heavy indemnity on the country and extracted fresh concessions from the enfeebled empire.

Cixi died in November 1908, one day after the emperor Xianfeng passed away – there has been speculation ever since that she and her chief eunuch had him poisoned to prevent him promoting more sweeping reforms, as well as taking revenge on those who had acted against him. By then the decline of the Middle Kingdom and the catastrophe of the Boxer episode had induced a greater sense of purpose among at least some of those governing China. Administration was modernised; industry and commerce were encouraged; a railway was completed from Beijing to the Yangtze; army reform was promoted with new units armed with modern weapons; and groups campaigning for greater rights for women sprouted in major cities. (The urban population was rising by up to 10 per cent a year.)

But the Qing faced one big and growing problem. They were Manchus and not members of China’s Han majority. The ousting of the ‘foreign’ rulers had been a central theme of the Taiping rebellion, which accused the Qing of wanting to reduce the number of Hans as they
‘unleashed grasping officials and corrupt subordinates who stripped the people of their flesh’. Though skilful in adopting Chinese culture and traditions, the way in which the Qing forced non-Manchus to wear a pigtail was an obvious sign of domination. They remained foreign rulers of a multi-ethnic realm that stretched from Manchuria through Mongolia to the great western territory of Xinjiang and Tibet.

**Expel the Manchus**

The revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen, a native of Guangdong province who had studied medicine in Hong Kong and then organised revolts and campaigned internationally against the Qing, seized on this racial element together with his Han co-conspirators. ‘Expel the Manchus’ was an easy rallying cry for anybody with a grievance. As a commentator put it at the time ‘even the dull-witted can understand it, talk about it and act upon it so that it can become influential and widespread’.

An 18-year-old student, Tsou Jung, summed up the anti-Qing sentiment in the opening of his book, *The Revolutionary Army* (1903):

Sweep away thousands of years of despotism, cast off thousands of years of slavishness, exterminate the five million bestial Manchus, wash away the humiliation of 260 years of repression and sorrow, cruelty and tyranny, turn the Chinese soil into a free land ... Then we may rise from death and return to life, retrieve ourselves, come out of the 18th layers of hell and descend to the 33rd level of Heaven.
The young author was detained for sedition in the International Settlement of Shanghai, but the authorities there refused to hand him over to the Chinese and he died in prison in 1905, probably from tuberculosis, though rumours had it that imperial agents had poisoned him.

In Zhejiang province on China’s east coast Qiu Jin (1875-1907), a young woman who directed a modern girl’s school, helped to lead a rising that began with the assassination of the Manchu governor. It was soon put down and Qiu was beheaded; lines said to be from her confession, but probably by another author, were quoted by revolutionaries across the country: ‘Autumn rain, autumn wind, they make one die of sorrow.’

Though repeated risings by Sun’s followers in southern China all flopped, the Qing faced a more substantial challenge from the urban gentry and some members of the modernised army. The gentry in China’s cities chafed at the way in which they saw themselves as being excluded from the country’s development, for instance, resenting the way that railway contracts were handed to investors from Britain, Belgium, Russia, the United States and France, who provided much-needed cash for the imperial treasury in return. The Qing, they charged, was at the beck and call of foreign powers set on ‘carving up the melon’ of China between them.

Businessmen complained about the stultifying effect of regulations, which the Shanghai General Chamber of Commerce said was ‘enough to make our entire circle of merchants cry’. After the death of Cixi in 1908, the court came under the control of Puyi’s father Prince Chun
(1883-1951), who became the regent. He allowed the establishment of provincial assemblies, followed by a meeting of a national body in Beijing. The powers devolved to these groups turned out to be extremely limited. A decree of 1908 announced that the calling of a full parliament was to be postponed for nine years. The franchise for the provincial assemblies was estimated to amount to only 0.42 per cent of the population.

Though these bodies were nothing more than talking shops for the elite, they did galvanise the Han gentry into action. A meeting of assembly men in Beijing at the end of 1909 formed what amounted to a political party, the Friends of the Constitution, which took as a rallying point the recovery of concession rights granted to the foreigners, especially for railways. But Chun and the nobles round him showed their lack of political touch and their intention of retaining power by appointing a cabinet dominated by Manchus.

The revolution ignites

Discontent with the dynasty was rising among other groups, too. Some of this was economic. Competition from India and Japan hit Chinese tea-growers while cheap imports of iron undercut domestic production. Secret societies in the countryside staged risings. Natural disasters caused famines in several provinces. Grain prices rose and opium farmers protested against the campaign to eradicate the drug.

It was against this background that the events in Hankou on October 9th and 10th, 1911 set off the revolution. Rebel soldiers numbering around 3,600 defeated 3,000
Qing loyalists to take the local government headquarters. An imperial counter-attack was repulsed, Qing officials fled and local leaders in central China in league with secret societies took charge. In some places, Manchus were massacred.

Sun was in the United States at the time and the revolutionaries chose as their leader a short, squat 47-year-old brigade commander, Li Yuanhong (1864-1928). He was not a natural revolutionary. One story had it that rebels found him hiding under his bed and that he had to be forced to put his name to a proclamation that had been drawn up to hail the advent of a republican regime. The uprising spread across seven provinces. Soon after rebels took the military arsenal in Shanghai and Chen Qimei (1878-1916) a member of Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary movement, the United League, was declared military governor. He sent his young associate Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) with a ‘do or die’ unit to take the government seat in the historic city of Hangzhou. In Guangdong, in the south, another of Sun’s associates, Hu Hanmin (1879-1936), took over after the imperial governor fled.

The revolt spread so fast and so wildly in part because of the years of growing estrangement from the Qing, but also because it was a regime change with which the gentry sympathised. In no way a popular revolt, it was predominantly urban, enlisting the support of the merchant class as well as officers in the new army set up by the Qing as part of the late efforts at modernisation but who turned against the regime. Sun Yat-sen might preach the three principles of nationalism, democracy and the people’s livelihood but there was little talk of a
social upheaval among those guiding the uprising. The main aim was to get rid of the Qing and to strengthen the hold of the gentry and the modernised army on the country.

At the time the revolt broke out Sun was on a fund-raising trip (overseas Chinese constituted one of his main sources of support and finance). He was in Denver, Colorado and read the news in a local paper. Rather than returning straight to China he went to Europe to lobby the British and French governments not to intervene on behalf of the Qing. Then he made his way by sea to Shanghai, arriving at the end of the year. On December 29th a national assembly made up of representatives of 17 provinces voted for Sun to become the first president of the Republic of China. On the night of January 1st, 1912 he was inaugurated in the new republican capital of Nanjing. Handed the seals of office in a brightly-lit hall, he swore to ‘overthrow the despotic Manchu government, consolidate the Republic of China and plan for the welfare of the people’.

By then the revolution had spread through central and southern China and the big western province of Sichuan, where the imperial governor was decapitated and his head paraded through the streets. But the Qing were still on the throne in Beijing and had scored a military victory against the revolution in central China. This was the work of a 52-year-old Han general, Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), who had made his name at the head of one of China’s new armies and had come to the aid of the dowager empress when she reversed the tide of reform launched by her nephew in 1898. But the regent, Prince Chun was an old enemy and Yuan had been sacked after
Cixi’s death – the official reason was that he was suffering from a leg ailment. Now, however, he appeared to be the only man who could preserve the dynasty and was recalled. He was asked to command the campaign against the insurgents in the central Yangtze region.

Yuan laid down stiff conditions, demanding command of all the armed forces and a promise of political reform. When these were accepted he sent imperial forces down the railway line to rout the rebels in Hankou and its neighbouring cities, inflicting a death toll estimated at 28,000. Yuan returned to Beijing to be sworn in as prime minister of the imperial cabinet with a government made up of ten Han and a single Manchu. Prince Chun abdicated as regent, while the new strong man of China insisted a constitutional monarchy was required.

However Yuan was playing a double game, making himself indispensible to the Qing while entering into secret communication with the insurgents in the central Yangtze region and sending an agent to talk to republicans in Shanghai and Nanjing. On January 16th, 1912 he went to the Forbidden City with what amounted to a demand for the abdication of the infant emperor. He did not get an immediate reply but he was elevated to the rank of marquis, first class, a reward for his perceived loyalty to the Qing. As he left the palace, however, four bombs were thrown at his carriage. Ten of the attackers, believed to be revolutionaries, were caught and three were shot.

Amid fresh assassination attempts by revolutionaries the Manchu and Mongol princes discussed Yuan’s petition. Some favoured fomenting a rising on the lines of the one
by the Boxers to back the dynasty. But the snag was that the Manchus were outnumbered by Han troops in Beijing. Forty-two army commanders went to court to call for Puyi’s abdication. ‘My own and the boy’s life are in your hands,’ the Dowager Empress Longyu shouted at them. ‘Go and tell Yuan Shikai nicely that he must save us.’

On February 12th the abdication was announced. The dowager and Puyi were to retire, she said:

To a life of leisure, free from the public duties, spending our time pleasantly and enjoying the courteous treatment accorded to us by the people and watching with satisfaction the glorious establishment and consummation of perfect government.

A sentence inserted into the decree gave Yuan responsibility for uniting the nation and founding a republic. There was a slight problem, however. A republic had already been declared by the national assembly in Nanjing and Sun Yat-sen had been elected as president. In the discussion before he was given the post, Sun had argued strongly against a proposal by a young delegate, Song Jiaoren (1882-1913), that a parliamentary regime with a prime minister should be adopted rather than an executive presidency. His face red, the veteran revolutionary who had insisted on quasi-dictatorial control of his own movement against the Qing said he was not going to be reduced to ‘some kind of holy excrescence while the great plans for the revolution are ruined’.

But Sun knew from the start that he would not be able to retain power when confronted by Yuan and stepped
down voluntarily on April 1st. His attempt to get Nanjing confirmed as the national capital failed when a delegation sent to Beijing to plead the case was attacked by Yuan’s troops in the early hours of the morning, its members fleeing in their night clothes.

Yuan was duly elected president and, in line with his track record as a supple deal-maker, took Li Yuanhong as vice-president – though Li stayed in his Yangtze region powerbase rather than joining the northern generals clustered around the new head of state in Beijing. Sun took the job of railways minister and embarked on a tour of China during which he drew lines on a large map where he thought track should be laid – since these sometimes went through impassable mountain terrain an aide tactfully rubbed them out before the Father of the Republic presented his plans to the press.

**An inauspicious start**

As he renounced his presidency Sun hailed Yuan as ‘the friend of the Republic, the devoted and valued servant of the cause’. Yuan certainly saw the need to modernise China and centralise power after the dislocation that had followed the rising in October 1911. But he was far from the model republican, alienating Sun who founded the Guomindang Party in August 1912 to oppose him. When Song Jiaoren led the opposition to victory in legislative elections Yuan’s agents assassinated him at Shanghai station in March 1913 as he boarded a train to Beijing to claim the position of prime minister.

Yuan banned ‘secret organisations’, which could mean any groups he did not like, and had himself proclaimed
as a new emperor, a step he was forced to annul because of the opposition it aroused. He faced regional revolts. Short of money and needing support he also got into dangerous negotiations with the Japanese, which threatened to hand effective control of much of China’s administration to Tokyo.

When Yuan died of blood poisoning in 1916 he was not mourned and his lack of a clear successor set off ten years of warlord anarchy on a national scale. Sun campaigned ceaselessly for national unity, proposing a Northern Expedition from his base in Canton (now Guangzhou) in southern China but failing to make an impression before his death of liver cancer in Beijing in 1925. The following year, however, Chiang Kai-shek, Sun’s successor as head of the Guomindang, led his forces out of the south to conquer or buy over the main warlords and founded a nationalist regime based in Nanjing in 1927 that endured, with many travails, until it was defeated by the Communists in 1949 and decamped to Taiwan.

The revolution that began in October 1911 did not, therefore, bring the changes its more ardent proponents had hoped for. Very few of the country’s people took part in it. Local power holders – the gentry and army men – remained in place. Instead of the people whose livelihood Sun proclaimed as one of his main concerns, it was the foreign rulers and the local power holders that benefited most from the fall of the Manchus. This was a shift of regime, not a social sea change. The foreigners held on to their concessions and China was unable to keep up with Japan, the rising Asian power.
The institutions of the new republic were feeble from the start – Yuan referred to it as ‘a very young baby’. That weakness undermined the fresh attempt in 1927 to launch a functioning national republic. Though there was some progress, Chiang faced recurrent regional revolts and invasion by Japan leading to full-scale war from 1937 to 1945, creating the inherent fragility of the Nationalist administration. It was not until 1949 that real revolution came to China and, when it did, it opened the path to the increasingly deranged schemes of Mao Zedong (1893-1976), leading to the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s, the Great Famine which may have taken more than 40 million lives and then the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. Only since Deng Xiaoping (1904–97) set the country on the course of economic reform in the 1980s has China regained a degree of normality and even then it has been marked by continuing political repression.

The basic question remains unanswered of whether a nation as big as China and with the democratic deficit from which the country has always suffered can be ruled other than by a top-down regime. What is clear is that, for all the celebrations in the mainland and Taiwan this autumn, the revolution of 1911-12 brought no real solution and left China facing decades of suffering.


Further reading:

• Marie-Claire Bergère, *Sun Yat-sen* (Stanford University Press, 1998)
• Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (W.W. Norton, 1990)
• Earl Albert Selle, *Donald of China* (Harper, 1948)