



POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN CHINA IN THE LATE 19TH — EARLY 20TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the political situation in China at the turn of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including the decline of the Qing dynasty, the expansion of Western powers and Japan, reform movements, popular uprisings, and the 1911 Revolution. Based on an analysis of domestic and foreign historiography, the author demonstrates how the combination of internal crises and external pressures led to the collapse of the imperial system and the emergence of Republican China.

Keywords. *China, Qing dynasty, Opium Wars, Xinhai Revolution, semi-colonial state, Hundred Days' Reform, Boxer Rebellion, Sun Yat-sen*

INTRODUCTION

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constituted a turning point in Chinese history, when the traditional imperial system entered a state of profound crisis. The weakening of central authority, socio-economic difficulties, and the intensification of external pressure from Western powers and Japan necessitated large-scale transformations within the country [6, pp. 215–220; 9, pp. 312–318; 10, pp. 44–49].

The study of China's political situation during this period is important not only from the perspective of regional history, but also for understanding the mechanisms of transformation of traditional empires under the conditions of their encounter with Western modernity. The aim of this article is to examine the key political processes that led to the collapse of the imperial system and the establishment of the Chinese Republic.

Furthermore, the study seeks to identify the structural factors that determined the trajectory of China's political development, including the interaction between internal institutional crises and external geopolitical pressures. Particular attention is paid to the role of reform movements, revolutionary ideologies, and the emergence of new political actors in shaping the transition from imperial to republican governance. In this context, the Chinese case provides a valuable analytical framework for exploring broader patterns of state transformation and modernization in non-Western societies.

METHODS

This study employs historical-genetic, comparative-historical, and systemic approaches, which allow for an integrated analysis of political processes in their interrelation. The research is based on the analysis of scholarly literature and historical sources.

RESULTS

The study has demonstrated that the crisis of the Qing Empire was systemic in nature. Internal problems—such as population growth, economic difficulties, corruption, and the weakening of the military—led to large-scale uprisings, including the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), which, according to various estimates, claimed between 20 and 30 million lives and clearly exposed the inability of the central government to maintain control over the country [4, pp. 45–52; 1, pp. 178–185; 11, pp. 102–110].

Simultaneously, other uprisings unfolded, including the Nian Rebellion (1851–1868), the Dungan uprisings in Yunnan and the Northwest (1856–1873), and the Panthay Rebellion. All of these



developments indicated that traditional mechanisms of governance—the Grand Council (Junji Chu), the system of the mandarin bureaucracy, and the Confucian examination system (keju)—were losing their capacity to ensure political stability.

Under these conditions, regional military leaders (junfa) assumed an increasingly prominent role. Figures such as Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, and Zuo Zongtang established their own armies and extensive political networks, effectively marginalizing the Manchu elite from real political power. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the “provincialization of power” and became one of the structural preconditions for subsequent warlord fragmentation.

At the same time, external pressure intensified. The Opium Wars and the subsequent unequal treaties resulted in the partial loss of sovereignty and transformed China into a semi-colonial state [2, pp. 96–102; 6, pp. 230–235]. Foreign powers obtained significant economic and political privileges.

The First Opium War (1839–1842) concluded with the Treaty of Nanking, under which China ceded Hong Kong to Great Britain and opened five “treaty ports” to foreign trade. This marked the beginning of the unequal treaty system, which historians regard as a mechanism for turning China into a semi-colonial state [9].

The Second Opium War (1856–1860), also known as the “Arrow War,” ended with the Treaties of Tianjin and Beijing. These agreements granted Western powers extraterritorial rights, fixed customs tariffs (not exceeding 5%), free access for missionaries, the opening of additional ports, and the right of foreign vessels to navigate China’s inland waterways [2, pp. 120–128]. According to J. Fairbank, by 1900 China had been bound by more than 50 unequal treaties with 17 foreign powers [6, pp. 240–242; 9, pp. 320–322].

The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 dealt a severe blow to the prestige of the Qing dynasty. The Treaty of Shimonoseki stipulated the cession of Taiwan, the Pescadores Islands, and the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan, as well as the payment of a large indemnity of 200 million taels of silver. Defeat by Japan—a country traditionally perceived by China as a peripheral civilization—constituted a profound psychological and political shock and accelerated the search for reform alternatives.

The period known as the “scramble for concessions” (1895–1899) witnessed the division of China into spheres of influence: Germany acquired Jiaozhou, Russia obtained Port Arthur and Dalian, France took control of Guangzhouwan, and Great Britain leased Weihaiwei [13]. In effect, China stood on the brink of formal colonial partition.

Attempts at modernization, such as the Self-Strengthening Movement and the reforms of 1898, proved insufficient due to resistance from conservative forces [1, pp. 210–218; 5, pp. 134–140]. The Self-Strengthening Movement (zhiqiang yundong, 1861–1895) was initiated by regional officials such as Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, and Zhang Zhidong. Their program focused on technological modernization while preserving Confucian values: arsenals and military factories were established, the first railways were constructed, and modern naval fleets were developed [1, pp. 198–205; 6, pp. 226–230]. However, China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War revealed the limitations of this approach: without reforming political institutions, technological borrowing alone could not ensure state stability [7, pp. 84–88; 9, pp. 318–321].

In 1898, young intellectuals Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, with the support of the Guangxu Emperor, initiated the “Hundred Days’ Reform” (Bianfa). Between June 11 and September 21, 1898, more than one hundred edicts were issued, providing for the reform of the examination system, the establishment of modern schools and universities, the reorganization of the army, the introduction of budgetary transparency, and the promotion of entrepreneurship [5, pp. 136–142; 6, pp. 232–235].



However, the reforms encountered strong resistance from the conservative Manchu elite led by Empress Dowager Cixi. On September 21, 1898, Cixi carried out a coup d'état, placed the Guangxu Emperor under house arrest, executed six reformers (the "Six Gentlemen"), while Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao fled abroad [6, pp. 235–238; 7, pp. 90–92]. The failure of the Hundred Days' Reform strengthened the position of the conservative opposition and clearly demonstrated the limitations of "top-down" reforms within the existing political system [5, pp. 140–145; 3, pp. 50–54].

The Boxer Uprising of 1900 represented a manifestation of anti-imperialist sentiments, yet ultimately led to an even greater expansion of foreign control [6, pp. 240–245]. The Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) became the culmination of anti-imperialist movements in China. Emerging from the secret society known as the "Righteous and Harmonious Fists," the movement proclaimed the expulsion of foreigners and the destruction of Christian missionaries as its primary goals [6, pp. 238–242; 9, pp. 326–329].

In May–June 1900, the rebels laid siege to foreign legations in Beijing; Cixi, seeking to use the Boxers against foreign powers, declared war on all foreign states [6, pp. 242–244]. In response, an international coalition of eight powers (Great Britain, Germany, Russia, France, the United States, Japan, Italy, and Austria-Hungary) dispatched an expeditionary force of approximately 55,000 troops. Beijing was captured and looted in August 1900 [9, pp. 329–332; 7, pp. 92–95].

The Boxer Protocol of 1901 obliged China to pay an indemnity of 450 million taels of silver (with interest amounting to approximately 982 million) over a period of 39 years, to allow foreign troops to be stationed in Beijing, and to dismantle fortifications along the route to the capital [2, pp. 130–134; 6, pp. 244–248].

The culmination of the crisis was the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, which led to the سقوط of the Qing dynasty and the proclamation of the Chinese Republic [11, pp. 120–125]. However, political stability was not achieved, and the country entered a period of internal fragmentation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a broad anti-dynastic front had emerged within Chinese society. The revolutionary activities of Sun Yat-sen, who founded the Tongmenghui (United League) in Tokyo in 1905, unified various opposition groups under the slogan of the "Three Principles of the People" (Sanmin zhuyi): nationalism, democracy, and people's livelihood [7, pp. 96–101; 9, pp. 334–338].

The immediate trigger of the revolution was the government's decision to nationalize the railways in May 1911, which undermined the interests of regional investors. On October 10, 1911, a military uprising broke out in Wuchang, which historiography refers to as the Xinhai Revolution. Within two months, most southern and central provinces declared independence from Beijing [7, pp. 102–106; 6, pp. 250–254].

On January 1, 1912, the Chinese Republic was proclaimed in Nanjing, with Sun Yat-sen as its provisional president. However, real military power remained in the hands of General Yuan Shikai. On February 12, 1912, the child emperor Puyi abdicated the throne, bringing to an end more than two thousand years of imperial rule in China [6, pp. 254–258; 9, pp. 338–342].

Nevertheless, the revolution did not lead to genuine democratization. Yuan Shikai dissolved parliament in 1913, banned the Kuomintang, and in 1915 attempted to restore the monarchy. The failure of these plans and his death in 1916 ushered in a period of warlord fragmentation (junfa), which became a direct continuation of the political crisis of the Qing era [9, pp. 342–347; 3, pp. 54–58].



DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the political crisis in China was обусловлен a combination of internal and external factors. Internal structural problems were exacerbated by external pressure, making reform efforts extremely difficult [3, pp. 48–52; 6, pp. 250–255; 12, pp. 70–78].

Attempts at reform from above failed to produce systemic changes, as they did not address the fundamental structures of the political system [1, pp. 220–225]. The revolution thus emerged as a закономерный outcome of accumulated contradictions, yet it did not resolve the key problems of state governance [9, pp. 340–345].

Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that China's transformation was part of a broader modernization process that continues into the twenty-first century [10, pp. 80–85].

Thus, the period under consideration should be interpreted as a stage of profound transformation during which the foundations for China's subsequent development in the twentieth century were established.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of China's political situation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries allows for several general conclusions to be drawn.

First, the crisis of the Qing Empire was systemic in nature and was обусловлен the mutually reinforcing interaction between the internal degradation of state institutions and external expansion [6, pp. 258–263; 9, pp. 340–345].

Second, attempts at “top-down” reforms (the Self-Strengthening Movement, the Hundred Days' Reform, and the New Policies) repeatedly encountered resistance from conservative court elites and ultimately failed to produce systemic results [1, pp. 220–225; 5, pp. 140–145; 3, pp. 52–56].

Third, the 1911 Revolution, while abolishing the monarchy, did not resolve the problem of political fragmentation, but rather transformed it into a form of militarized confrontation [7, pp. 104–110; 9, pp. 342–347].

Fourth, this period served as a matrix for subsequent political developments in China up to 1949, as it was during this time that key ideological alternatives and institutional precedents were сформулированы, shaping the country's trajectory in the twentieth century [6, pp. 262–268; 9, pp. 350–355].

Ultimately, the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Chinese history should be interpreted not merely as a period of political instability, but as a stage of profound systemic and civilizational transformation, during which a new political subjectivity of the Chinese state and nation within the international system was formed. The political situation in China during this period was characterized by a complex crisis resulting from the interaction of internal structural contradictions and increasing external pressure from industrialized powers [6, pp. 260–265].

The collapse of the Qing dynasty and the transition to a republican form of government constituted a key этап of the modernization process, marking the beginning of the institutional restructuring of the political system. However, this transition was not accompanied by the establishment of stable mechanisms of governance, which resulted in a prolonged period of political instability manifested in the strengthening of regionalism and warlord fragmentation.

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