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Yuan Shikai

A Reappraisal

PATRICK FULIANG SHAN



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A Note on Romanization

Following the current trend of scholarship, this book adopts the *pinyin* system of transliteration for Chinese personal names, places, and special phrases. To respect Chinese customs, the surname appears before the given name. In the bibliography, however, the surname is provided first but is not separated from the given name by a comma. For Chinese-American or Chinese-Canadian names, their surnames appear after their given names, just like other American or Canadian names. Special phrases are transliterated in a combination of a few Chinese syllables. For example, *Qieguodadao* appears as one phrase, instead of four separate syllables. For Chinese publishers, their *pinyin* names are rendered without further translation. Almost all Chinese names are romanized in *pinyin*, but some long-accepted Wade-Giles versions are retained; notably, “Sun Yat-sen” rather than the *pinyin* “Sun Zhongshan” and “Chiang Kai-shek” instead of “Jiang Jieshi.” Traditional terms are kept, such as “*ginseng*” rather than the Mandarin “*renshen*.” Occasionally, the name of a famous personage is provided in *pinyin* followed by its original Wade-Giles version in brackets. “Yuan Shikai,” is spelled according to the *pinyin* system, rather than the Wade-Giles “Yuan Shih-kai,” or another variant “Yuan Shi-k’ai,” which were the two spellings known to the world when he was president of China.

Yuan Shikai

Introduction

The century-old negative image of Yuan Shikai, the first president of the Republic of China (1912–16), is now deeply embedded in modern Chinese culture and history. He is decried as the most despicable traitor who sold out the reformers of 1898; he is denounced as the most regressive of politicians who defended an obsolete feudal system; he is reviled as the most notorious usurper who snatched away the fruits of the 1911 Revolution; he is condemned as a most ruthless dictator who concentrated power in his own hands during his presidency; and he is slammed as the most reactionary of warlords, who commanded a powerful army personally loyal to himself.¹ Given such accusations, it suits Yuan's fellow Chinese to view him as a stereotypical historical villain (*fanmianlishirenwu*).² Strangely enough, this negative image was well-preserved throughout the twentieth century and has even slipped uncritically into the new millennium. More oddly, this hideous effigy has been preserved both in the oral tradition and in written annals so well that he has become a prominent target of perpetual censure. Everything about Yuan seems to be negative, starting with his birth and ending with his death. All that occurred in between is dismissed as disgraceful. Indeed, Yuan has cast a lengthening sinister shadow upon twentieth-century culture in both Mainland China and Taiwan.

This phantasmagoric image of Yuan Shikai is now deeply imprinted on the collective memory of the Chinese people. A careful survey of the aforementioned “judgments” indicates that these negative images developed in accordance with the needs of political creeds and through the following perspectives: as an outgrowth of class categorization, whereby Yuan

was relegated to the feudal class; as a consequence of revolutionary judgment, in that Yuan was viewed as a counter-revolutionary; as the outcome of a moralistic verdict, in that Yuan was railed against as a traitor to the reformers. Needless to say, these political verdicts have forestalled a deeper and more impartial inquiry, and meanwhile, the majority of Chinese in both Mainland China and Taiwan have been influenced by this long-nurtured negative perspective. All of this has resulted in only a cursory study of Yuan. He epitomizes the dark side of history, he is an easy target for popular opprobrium, and he is a synonym for dishonour. Over the past century, few other men have been weighed down with such a villainous image.

The unique consensus between Mainland China and Taiwan on Yuan Shikai reflects the evolving political climate. The Nationalist Party's view is that Yuan was an enemy who suppressed Sun Yat-sen and his fellow Nationalists, betrayed the 1911 Revolution, and usurped the newly established republic for which Sun and his followers had sacrificed so many lives. According to the Chinese Communist Party, all of the previous regimes, including Yuan's, were reactionary, oppressive, and tyrannical and the Communists would have to topple them if history did not intervene first. With such a mindset, it is no wonder that Yuan's ignoble image has survived across the 1949 demarcation line and that his infamy persists on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Yuan Shikai's villainy is often mentioned in Chinese letters of all sorts. Almost all history textbooks comment negatively on him, as do other publications. Historical developments and regime changes have done nothing to weaken his unshakable infamy. We encounter this view of him in official documents, and meanwhile, individual writers have gone out of their way to criticize him. Political authors and civilian writers alike have adopted the same stance. For example, the earliest published work about Yuan is Huang Yi's *Yuanshidaoguoji* (*Records Revealing the Way Yuan Shikai Usurped the Nation*), published in 1916, in which Yuan is depicted as an immoral traitor and a cunning political operator. Huang Yi declares Yuan a "national thief" (*guozei*).³ In 1935, Bai Jiao, a Shanghai-based journalist, used the term "stealing the nation" (*daoguo*) to depict Yuan's machinations around the 1911 Revolution.⁴ But neither of these authors has been as influential as Chen Boda, a Communist theorist and Mao Zedong's personal secretary, who in 1946 bluntly labelled Yuan the "Great National Usurper" (*Qieguodadao*).⁵ And Chen's nomenclature has persisted in Chinese popular culture throughout the ensuing decades right down to this day.

It might seem that Yuan Shikai has been unanimously denounced, but this is not so. A careful reading of primary sources indicates that many people actually admired him, or at least judged him a bit more fairly. Family members described him as a strict but loving father to his children, a filial son to his parents, and a trustworthy man to his friends.⁶ When he became president, his long-time followers compiled a book highlighting his talent, sagacity, and bravery.⁷ His subordinates spoke highly of him – for instance, Gu Weijun (V.K. Wellington Koo; 1887–1985), a famous Chinese Nationalist diplomat, who once worked under Yuan, praised him as a remarkable figure, an intelligent man, and an admirable patriot.⁸ Foreign diplomats, including American and British ambassadors, offered positive comments on Yuan.⁹ Western missionaries complimented him as a patriot, a talented person, and a modernizer.¹⁰ American missionary Gilbert Reid esteemed Yuan as “a faultless man,” though he added that Yuan “unfortunately went astray because of misguidance.”¹¹

The 1990s saw a dramatic overhaul of Yuan’s evaluation. After nearly a century of violent revolutionary movements and mass political campaigns, the Chinese began to enjoy the fruits of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, which had been launched more than a decade earlier. As the country embarked on reform, the Chinese economy soared and citizens’ living standards rose significantly. Some Chinese scholars openly questioned whether revolution was the only approach to national salvation, and the country as a whole endorsed a more gentle approach to reform. All of this has affected current perceptions of Yuan. A voluminous literature about him has come into being. A few dozen biographies, hundreds of journal articles, and other kinds of literature, including novels and short stories, have been published, generating “Yuan Shikai Fever.” The quantity of this new assessment has not been matched by creative or ingenious quality; indeed, many of these writings tend to be repetitive in content – even “plagiaristic” in the Western sense.

The Chinese have since developed a strong interest in Yuan. In contrast to the previous notorious stereotype, he is now praised as a reformer, a modernizer, a national hero, a talented administrator, a wise politician, and an adept poet. His errors, such as his attempt to restore the dynastic system, are still censured, but his attempts to modernize the nation are praised. Many past accusations are quietly being dropped, and some scholars are going further, moving boldly to rehabilitate Yuan’s reputation.¹² Of course, these radical efforts are criticized by those who adhere to the traditional stance. All said, however, an objective image of Yuan

Shikai is slowly emerging, and this constitutes a sharp break from the past condemnations and disdainful denunciations.

Most of today's writers about Yuan Shikai focus on his vital role in training the first new modern army, his significant contributions during the New Administration (*xinzheng*), his crucial involvement in the "bloodless" 1911 Revolution (*Xinhaigeming*), his prominent role in the shift from empire to republic, his efforts to concentrate power during his wobbly presidency, and most importantly, his inglorious efforts to create the Hongxian monarchy. The newly published literature tends to be narrative in nature and lacks in-depth analysis. Large gaps are evident regarding Yuan's elite background, his tempestuous childhood, and his eventful Korean years. Fortunately, *Yuan Shikai quanji* (*The Complete Works of Yuan Shikai*) published in late 2013 by Henan University Press, offers voluminous primary sources that allow us to probe Yuan's family background and personal experiences. These thirty-six volumes were compiled by two Chinese scholars of Guangdong, Luo Baoshan and Liu Lusheng, who devoted three decades to collecting and editing Yuan Shikai's written works. *Yuan Shikai quanji* includes thousands of official documents and personal letters. Some of the documents may have been written by his aides or secretaries but nonetheless were approved by Yuan. With all of this new abundance, we now have no reason to complain about the dearth of primary sources, at least not in the Chinese materials.

By contrast, Western literature on Yuan Shikai is quite scanty. Over the past century, only one biography has been published – by Jerome Chen, a Chinese Canadian scholar, in 1961.¹³ In the almost six decades since, there has not been a second one in English. Chen is clearly an expert on modern China, and he skilfully weaves narratives about Yuan's role in Chinese politics. Yet his book has become outdated for modern readers – given the wealth of new materials available, it is a useful but timeworn volume whose narrative would benefit from comprehensive analysis and insightful interpretation, and it lacks materials about Yuan's family background and early years that are now available. Some chapters offer more about national history than about Yuan himself, making the book a concise account of the events during Yuan's lifetime. Also, Chen's use of the old Wade-Giles system for Chinese terms poses a barrier for twenty-first-century readers.

Two important monographs about Yuan Shikai and his political career have been published.¹⁴ One is Stephen R. MacKinnon's volume about Yuan as an important Qing official in Tianjin and Beijing between 1901 and 1908. In that book, MacKinnon challenges some Chinese scholars'

arguments about the centrifugal nature of political power during the late Qing Empire and about power devolving from the centre to provincial elites. MacKinnon examines the three expanding nodes of power: the centre, the provinces, and the regions. He argues that Yuan's case did not reflect the centrifugal theory. Instead, he notes that Yuan maintained strong ties with the Imperial Court from which he received his power. MacKinnon points out that Yuan was a talented official who positioned himself at the intersection of those three nodes of power, relying on the Imperial Court but responding to the needs of provincial and local elites. MacKinnon also observes the strong foreign influence on Chinese politics. Another important monograph is Ernest P. Young's discourse on Yuan Shikai's presidency (1912–16), which focuses on the two trends of conservatism and liberalism during the years when Yuan was the national leader. Rejecting the notion that Yuan was a reactionary warlord, Young carefully analyses Yuan's policies as well as his relations with the gentry and the military. Young demonstrates that Yuan was extremely power-hungry and increasingly concentrated power in his own hands. The monographs by MacKinnon and Young were typical of Western scholarship on Yuan. However, they were published in 1977 and 1980 respectively and need to be supplemented with new findings and new sources. More importantly, these two scholars do not deal much with Yuan's personal life, focusing instead on the power structure and political affairs during the years from 1901 to 1916.

There is an urgent need for a twenty-first-century biography of Yuan Shikai that incorporates newly unearthed primary sources, that integrates existing scholarship, and that offers fresh perspectives. Such a book would fill the void left by the long interval since Chen's biography appeared in 1961; it would also help Western readers understand modern Chinese history and politics as well as, more broadly, new trends in Chinese civilization. In many ways, Yuan embodied the enormous changes taking place in modern China, and an understanding of him will help readers understand the country's recent past. Because of the voluminous recent literature and the new availability of primary source materials, it is now possible to write a comprehensive biography of Yuan. A new assessment of him in the context of his family background and the momentous changes China underwent during his lifetime will do much to inform – and intrigue – readers in this new century.

Yuan Shikai was first and foremost a product of history. He was the scion of an elite family, a product of his foreign mission, a crystallization of his military program, an artefact of turbulent political changes, and an outcome of his own personal ambition. Yuan built his power base on the

ruins of the declining Qing Empire, yet he never earned a degree in the Civil Service Examination System and thus did not rise through normal channels. He took the side of the imperial system, yet he endeavoured to modernize his country through reforms. He was a new man in the old system, but at the same time he was an old-timer among new modernizers. Yuan represents and perhaps embodies a bundle of contradictions within the declining Qing dynasty and the rising Chinese Republic. He enjoyed speedy promotion but through atypical channels. Unlike most officials rising from the grassroots to the provincial administration and then to the central government, he achieved prominence through a combination of foreign missions, military power, civilian management, and political manoeuvring. He never joined the revolutionary movement, but he easily landed the job as the first president of the post-revolutionary government and the newly established republic.

In retrospect, Yuan Shikai as a historical figure was produced by a number of historical factors, such as personal and social networks, individual gifts, propitious opportunities, domestic supports, foreign encouragement, and – most importantly – the 1911 Revolution. Yuan as a historical figure can be viewed as a political phenomenon, or a cultural happening, or a historical instance during the era of transition from empire to republic. These dramatic historical forces turned Yuan into a unique figure. His rise exemplifies the importance of the local gentry class, represents the rising supremacy of the military in civil politics, betokens soaring Han Chinese nationalism, and signals China's efforts to modernize. Yuan was shaped by his time and by his world, which together transformed him into a national figure.

This book is a study of Yuan Shikai from his birth to his death. It has a dozen chapters, each focusing on a particular time span. Instead of offering a narrative, each chapter provides an analysis that interprets Yuan as a historical figure. Readers will come to understand that Yuan was strongly impacted by his country's multiple and widely disruptive transformations. Given that he experienced the mass rebellions of the mid-nineteenth century, the self-strengthening movement, the Sino-foreign conflicts, the reform movement, the 1911 Revolution, and the founding of the republic, this book amounts to a discourse on those turbulent times, one that will enable readers to comprehend modern Chinese history through the lens of Yuan Shikai.

It is not my intention to glorify Yuan, as some readers might expect. Yuan needs no rehabilitation. One hundred years have passed since his death, and any effort at such a rehabilitation – especially in the new

century – would be irrelevant. Instead, this book presents a fair appraisal and an objective assessment. It will neither hide his mistakes nor exaggerate his contributions. It treats his life as a totality, examining the factors that led to his rise and scrutinizing his role in modern China's great transformation. Fair assessment does not mean rehabilitating him but rather presenting him objectively as a historical figure. To assess him fairly is not to downplay the heroism of the pioneering revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen, who launched a major revolution to overthrow the Qing dynasty. Rather, Yuan Shikai and Sun Yat-sen represent two distinct paths for modern China: Yuan was a conservative reformer and a modernizer; Sun was a radical revolutionary and also a modernizer. The fact that Sun's followers sacrificed their lives and forsook personal happiness qualifies them as national heroes. Nevertheless, Yuan too aimed at modernization, albeit by a different route. Ultimately, the two forces, along with others, worked together to bring down Qing imperial rule and to offer China a new republic. Through political manoeuvres, Yuan and Sun reached a compromise to build a republican system, for which Yuan seemingly could have become another George Washington, as many of his countrymen at the time eagerly anticipated.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the modernizing former governor general and military leader of the *ancien regime* committed a fatal mistake by trying to restore monarchism, which discredited him and cast him in a notorious light. Yuan's efforts in this regard were his own error; they were not only his personal tragedy but also the catastrophic misfortune of his nation.

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