After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924

by Peter Zarrow
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Peter Zarrow has taken on a topic which addresses the crucial questions faced by every historian of modern China, namely, "Why did China embark on the massive transformations of the twentieth century?" and "Could it all have been very different?" Zarrow succinctly puts his task into this seven-word statement: "This book is thus about political modernity" (5). The gargantuan undertaking, despite all professed simplicity, is based on a scrutiny of intellectual opinions from the Self-Strengthening period until the May Fourth years collected in public pronouncements or in the private correspondence of reformist literati, in the press, and in renowned publications.

Zarrow is well aware of the opinions of his colleagues in historical studies, discussing the interpretations of Joseph Levenson and Chow Tse-tsung alongside the latest works by Wong Young-tsu and Jeremy Barmé. Importantly, Zarrow also takes into account the extensive Chinese scholarship which has grown around the late Qing and early Republican China, an important development which Western authors often acknowledge without properly making use of this in their own writings. But Zarrow also knows his way around the archives, in particular those

documenting the opinions of reformist and revolutionary intellectuals as well as of their orthodox counterparts. The result of this detailed historiographic study is a volume written both for the curious student and for expert historians of modern China. While the former will be intrigued by the chronologically compact minutiae of the transition from the Qing empire to the Republic of China, the latter will appreciate the unceasing analysis of historical interpretation, most fruitfully discussed in Zarrow's endnotes.

The monograph begins and ends with a discussion of Yuan Shikai's (袁世凱) sacrifice at the Temple of Heaven in 1914, dissecting the symbolical significance of its ritualistic details, critically compared to the annual ritual as performed by the Qing emperors. Each individual chapter represents one of the intellectual milestones in the development of republican China. Chapter one thus embodies the story of Kang Youwei (康有為) and the reformist movement prompted by policy changes he proposed. In neat chronological sequence, the genesis of Kang's democratic (i.e., people (民)–centered) political thought, of his writings, interactions with court officials and fellow intellectuals is being developed. Kang Youwei's private ambitions apart, the opening chapter presents Kang's Confucian vision for a *better-functioning* dynastic empire, rather than a qualitatively novel form of government. The vision of Liang Qichao (梁啟超) regarding the democratic state becomes the topic of the subsequent chapter. Where his teacher still harbored dreams of a "Confucian China" as eventually being on a par with "Christian Europe," Liang only saw one way forward, namely that of a "modern China" based on the foundations of a strong and politically justified state. The democratic quality of the latter was not an absolute prerequisite, but rather a dignified way of ensuring the coming state's viability.

The following two chapters deal with the significant role of translation – as an intercultural phenomenon, a tool of Westernization and as an inescapable consequence of the growing role of Japan in the late colonial Asian East. The very reason for the existence of (the post-

1815) international diplomacy, as well as its relevance during the so-called Opium Wars and their consequences, needed to be conveyed to an intellectual public more acquainted with the perfection of moral dispositions and equitable government than with international relations. A strong "state" (國家), argued by translators and authors such as Zheng Guanying (鄭觀應), Yang Tingdong (楊廷棟), and once again by Liang Qichao, was essential in order to (re)integrate China into the world's more influential powers. Enthralled by the superior forms of government this generation of intellectuals encountered in Western statecraft writings, the will to create a strong state outweighed any cultural, ethnic, or political misgivings. In Zarrow's words (117), "Cai [Yuanpei] was beginning to look to the people while Liang looked to management."

Chapters five and six deal with the gradual abandonment of traditional answers to China's woes and thus also with the radicalization of China's intellectual youth. Here we encounter the intellectual confrontation - and eventual bankruptcy - of Western utilitarianism (as expressed in Zhang Zhidong's (張之洞) "Chinese essence, foreign learning" (中體西用) theory, supported by cautious reformers such as Wang Renjun (王仁俊) and the radicalism which propelled Yan Fu (嚴復), Huang Zunxian (黃遵憲), and Tan Sitong (譚嗣同) to attack the Confucian edifice of traditional China. Meanwhile, intellectuals opposed to surrendering to the new winds from the West, such as Su Yu (蘇輿), Zhu Yixin (朱一新), Ye Dehui (葉德輝), or Liu Dapeng (劉大鵬), gathered their forces. Anti-Manchuism and Han racialism, eloquently extolled by known intellectuals such as Zou Rong (鄒容), Liu Shipei (劉師培), and Zhang Binglin (章炳麟), dominate chapter five. Readers familiar with Zarrow's research interests will sense his need for self-restraint when it came to delineating the bare structures of both phenomena. Zarrow's latest monograph thus offers an intellectual framework into which his earlier studies can be placed. While chapters one through five deal with the intellectual gestation of the republican revolution, the final three chapters spell out its course: first in terms of republican vocabulary in

chapter six, then in chapter seven for the different classes inhabiting the transient China of the 1910s and eventually chapter eight which deals with the ultimate demise of imperial China and the fate of its last aristocrats. It is in this context that we encounter Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙) and also the first overtures to socialist idealism, and this mere fact is in itself a key reason as to why Zarrow's latest book is a true academic achievement. A new conceptual basis for the relationship between State and People, rather than republican activism as professed by Sun and his political allies, provided the death knell to an imperial model which had ceased to provide the answers to the predicaments nineteenth-century China was experiencing.

However, Zarrow's analysis does not afford the same level of attention to all aspects of the period under review. The late Qing reforms (新政) are given short shrift, with the end of the examination system in 1905 appearing as a curious lacuna. Importantly, in the context of anti-Manchuism, the Taiping rebellion is almost entirely omitted. The same goes for violent mass action without any direct input by intellectuals, from the Nian (捻) to the Red Spears (紅槍會). What possibly could any notions of "state" mean to a population which had been accustomed to a universe of fortified village walls and absentee landlordism? The defense of local privileges and livelihoods has been a key marker of Chinese life right into the present era, which ought to have been reflected in this otherwise excellent volume. In summary, *After Empire* is an important contribution to the historical discourse of China's imperial-republican transition and should also be widely welcomed by non-specialists with an interest in China.