

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 152

“Like a River Flowing On”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The epoch in which you are living, which epoch is this? It is the beginning of the sixteenth year of the twentieth century. The changes of the world are evolutionary, different from month to month, year to year. The shining history is unfolding, faster and faster...

To live in the present world, you must raise your head and proudly call yourself a person of the twentieth century: you must create a new civilization of the twentieth century and not confine yourself to following that of the nineteenth. For the evolution of human civilization is replacing the old with the new, like a river flowing on, an arrow flying away, constantly continuing and constantly changing.

Chen Duxiu, “The Year 1916.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 152. Like a River Flowing On.

It’s been a long time since we talked about China on this podcast. Not since episode 93, in fact. Just to refresh your memory, when we last looked at China, the Japanese, with British support, had captured the German concession on the Shandong Peninsula and had forced the Twenty-One Demands on China. Pressure from Britain, France, and Russia—Japan’s wartime allies—had compelled the Japanese to back down from the most extreme of the Twenty-One Demands, but China was still forced to agree to humiliating terms, including that the former German concession on the Shandong Peninsula would become a Japanese concession, expanding Japanese control over northeastern China.

Domestically, a revolution in 1911 overthrew the Qing Dynasty and led to the creation of the Republic of China. But the military leader Yuan Shikai brokered a peaceful resolution between the Imperial government in Beijing and the revolutionary government in Nanjing that included

making himself President of the new Republic, and once installed in office he had the leader of the Guomintang, the Nationalist Party, assassinated.

This led to an abortive attempt by the Nationalist Party to start a new revolution, known as the Second Revolution, in July 1913, but Yuan and his military were able to crush the Nationalists in a matter of months. Yuan reversed the democratization of China, dissolving the national and provincial legislatures and local councils and outlawing the Nationalist Party, which caused Sun Yat-Sen, the father of the Revolution and the first provisional president of the new Republic, to return to exile in Japan, right back where he had been during the Qing era.

Yuan Shikai also introduced military rule, appointed his own people as provincial governors and military leaders, instituted press censorship, and created secret police units to harry the political opposition. In short, the now 54-year old Yuan set himself up as a military dictator and ruled over China in a way not terribly different from the late Emperors.

It's not that Yuan was a greedy, power-hungry megalomaniac. Well, no, strike that. He was *certainly* a greedy, power-hungry megalomaniac. But his dictatorship came with maybe a half a political philosophy, which was this: that the Chinese nation was accustomed to rule by a powerful and autocratic Emperor, that it was now in a state of chaos bordering on anarchy and that the only hope of restoring China would be to restore a strong central government that ruled with a firm hand. Parliamentary democracy had proved too messy and too divisive to provide the kind of leadership the nation needed.

Yuan believed in reform, but he believed in the kind of incremental and conservative reform that the Qing were attempting to bring about in their last years: reforms such as a stronger central government, efficient and honest taxation, a strong military, more education, a modern legal code and court system, and a crackdown on China's pernicious opium trade. These were reforms that promised to strengthen the nation internally as well as allowing China to deal with the world's great powers as a peer, rather than as a supplicant.

These were worthy goals, but Yuan would never achieve them. To the contrary, his own greed and corruption would only make China's already weak international position weaker. He'd had to borrow more money from foreign lenders, on top of China's already exorbitant foreign debt. Naturally, these foreign loans came with strings attached: new concessions to foreign powers that further undermined China's sovereignty. The new money went to modernizing the army to keep Yuan's military supporters happy and keep the army strong enough to clamp down on unrest. Meanwhile, the government had to cut spending in other areas to service the new debt, which undermined the rest of its reform agenda.

But foreign governments, especially the European powers, bought into this idea that China had proved itself unable to operate as a democracy and that a strongman like Yuan in Beijing would do a better job of keeping China stable—and incidentally, protecting European investments in China. Recognition by the foreign powers, and especially foreign creditors, could make or break

a Chinese government. And for now, the foreigners were content to make this one rather than break it.

Then came the Great War. Yuan's government wanted to get into the war from the beginning, on the Allied side. It was not that China had such great grievances against Germany and Austria; it was that China wanted to take back the concessions Germany and Austria had forced upon her, not to mention that her contributing to the war effort would force the other Allies to accept China as an equal, a great power among the Great Powers, and grant China a seat at the table during the peace negotiations.

The Allies did not see this as in their interests and weren't interested in discussing it. Britain already had an alliance with Japan, a nation with a far larger navy, which is what the Allies really needed in the Pacific. The Japanese military had also proved itself the equal of Western militaries during the Russo-Japanese War, while the Chinese military had been humbled by the Japanese in the Sino-Japanese War and then again by the eight-power coalition during the Boxer Uprising. Yes, Yuan had modernized the Chinese military since then, but it remained untested, its quality questionable.

So the Allies urged China to remain neutral, while encouraging the Japanese to go nuts on German possessions in the Pacific, including China's Shandong Peninsula. Then Japan issued the Twenty-One Demands in January 1915. The Allies persuaded the Japanese to tone it down a little, but it was still a humiliation. In terms of Chinese domestic politics, it provoked an uproar, which was directed at Yuan. He was the one who had claimed dictatorial powers and all but buried the Revolution and he had done it in the name of strengthening China. The Twenty-One Demands episode represented a huge loss of face for the nation and therefore for Yuan, as it made him out to be a liar or a dupe or a puppet of the foreigners. Take your pick.

Yuan reacted to this challenge to his authority by reviving some of the old Imperial rituals with the new President of China filling the role of Emperor. As the year 1915 unfolded, his remaining supporters, no doubt at his urging, began floating the idea of reviving the Empire, at least as a constitutional monarchy, with Yuan Shikai as the new Emperor. Their reasoning went that China, with its ancient Imperial traditions and large and poorly educated population, needed a traditional Emperor figure for the nation to rally around. By autumn of 1915, Yuan was ready to yield to this supposed popular demand and agreed to become the first of a new dynasty, the Hongxian Emperor, effective on the first of January, 1916. On that date, Yuan was to perform the traditional accession rituals and formally take the throne.

This move was intended to shore up Yuan's political support, but it proved a disastrous miscalculation. There were monarchists who supported restoring the Qing Dynasty; they were enraged at the thought of installing some military pretender in the Forbidden City. There were republicans who already hated Yuan for betraying the revolution; now he was spitting in its face, too. In other words, it turned out that the huge, divided, fractious nation of China had one

principle after all that everyone could rally around—that Yuan Shikai had no business appointing himself Emperor.

There were protests across the nation calling for Yuan to abandon his plan. The foreign governments that had been propping him up until now didn't like this idea either. His British and Japanese “advisors” counseled him against it. And it didn't help any that three of Yuan's sons began an immediate and unseemly public jockeying among themselves to stake their claims as Yuan's heir. In fact, the 56-year old Yuan was by this time in poor health and has only months to live. How well this was known at the time is not clear, but his sons sure seemed to get the picture.

Even some of Yuan's best friends, by which I mean the military governors he appointed to help him rule the provinces, balked at this new power grab. On December 25, 1915, a week before Yuan was slated to become Emperor, the military governor of Yunnan province, in the mountainous southwest of the country, declared independence. Within days, other military governors in the region followed suit, and Yuan had a full-blown rebellion on his hands, forcing him to send the army south from Beijing to put down the uprising in a conflict the Chinese call the National Protection War.

The discord forced Yuan to, first, postpone his official accession ceremony, and later, on March 22, to drop the whole idea and abandon his Imperial ambitions. He died less than three months after that, on June 6. His successor was the 52-year old Vice-President, Li Yuanhong. As you may recall, we met Li before, back when he was a military commander under the Imperial government who became a reluctant leader of the First Revolution after he was dragged out from under his bed and given the choice of leading the revolution or being killed. He had sided with Yuan during the Second Revolution, which made him useful to Yuan as one of the few southern revolutionaries from 1911 who accepted his power grab. Yuan married one of his sons to Li's daughter and set him up as vice president, though Li had little political power on his own.

Now he was President of the Republic, in part because the revolutionaries in the south knew him and found him more acceptable than any of Yuan's old military buddies, but Yuan's prime minister, Duan Qirui, would hold his position. There was a half-hearted attempt to reconvene the national assembly that Yuan had dissolved, but the old constitutional order was by now beyond reviving. For one thing, Duan, the prime minister, was one of Yuan's old military comrades from the northern army, and the military was loyal to him, not to the constitution. Also, remember that rebellion in the south? After Yuan was gone, the rebel generals rescinded their declarations of independence, but they didn't exactly go back to being loyal subordinates of the government in Beijing, either.

In fact, military governors across China took advantage of the chaos in Beijing to claim *de facto*, if not *de jure*, independence and ruled like medieval lords, paying lip service to patriotism and their duty to the nation while in practice ruling as local sovereigns, each over their own little

fiefs. This is, in fact, the beginning of what's called the Warlord Era in China. But we'll talk more about that in future episodes. For now, let's just contemplate the irony that Yuan Shikai justified his claim to absolute power by arguing that China could only be strong if it had a strong central government, and yet he left behind no heir, no handpicked successor, no plan for succession, but instead allowed a situation in which his death would fracture the Chinese nation into dozens of mini-states.

[music: Chinese Buddhist Ritual]

Why is it that China—the most populous nation in the world, a nation that has stood for millennia as the most advanced, the most prosperous, the most cultured nation, certainly in east Asia and often in the entire world—why is it now a toothless tiger, a pathetic supplicant, a nation unable to assert its own sovereign dignity even against Japan, a much smaller country that the Chinese once regarded as little more than a satellite?

This is a question we've asked before, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*. The Han Chinese who revolted against the Qing in 1911 blamed the monarchy. China's ancient absolutist monarchy was out of date, a millstone around the neck of the nation, stifling innovation and holding China back from its natural position as one of the world's leading nations.

Aside from the political dimension, there was always more than a little racism in this argument. The Qing Dynasty was a Manchu dynasty, and the Manchu are a different ethnic group from the Han Chinese, who make up 90% of China's population, then and now. The republican revolutionaries were also arguing that the Manchu were a weak and corrupt race, inferior to the Han, and that eliminating them would unleash the strength and diligence of the Han majority.

It was possible to believe such things in 1911, and when the Revolution did come, against all odds and despite the brutal repression of the Qing, and it must have seemed like a dream come true. But it all crashed and burned in short order, and here we are in 1916, a mere five years later, with China seemingly more weak and pathetic than ever, despite the fall of the Qing that was supposed to usher in the new era in which China stands strong and tall. What in the world is going on here?

Chinese intellectuals pondered this question, and out of their ruminations grew a new theory to explain what had gone wrong in China, and where lay the path forward, the path that would lead China into the twentieth century. Out of this ferment in the world of Chinese letters came what is known as the "New Culture Movement," and its two centers were Peking University and the city of Shanghai.

The story of the New Culture Movement begins in 1915 in Shanghai when a disgruntled 35-year-old Chinese intellectual named Chen Duxiu began publishing a magazine called at first simply *Youth*, though the name would soon change to *New Youth*. Chen himself had received a traditional Chinese education and then gone on to study in Japan. And like him, many of the

magazine's contributors and readers, the leaders of the New Culture Movement, had received both Chinese and foreign educations, often in Europe, and their own experiences led them to the conclusion that it was China's own antiquated and hidebound literary, cultural, and scientific traditions that were preventing the country from attaining the stature of the Western powers. *New Youth* urged its readers to be cosmopolitan, to learn from other cultures, to evaluate new ideas pragmatically and scientifically, rather than reject them merely for being foreign or alien to Chinese values. I read from one of Chen's essays in *New Youth* at the top of the episode.

The magazine published articles on politics and education, art, literature, and culture along with short fiction, but in everything it published, *New Youth* held up Western ideals, especially democracy, individual rights, and modern science and technological progress, as examples to be followed and harshly condemned many aspects of traditional Chinese culture.

One of the major reforms advocated by the magazine and the movement was for the modernization of the written Chinese language. In 1915, when *New Youth* first began publication, virtually all formal Chinese writing was done in classical Chinese. Now, I'm going to try as best I can as a foreigner to explain to all you foreigners what this means. You probably already know that Chinese is not written phonetically, like most Western languages, or even semi-phonetically, like English. Chinese is written in characters and each character represents one syllable, which is usually a word, although there are characters that have no meaning on their own and only function within a phrase or sentence. Also, Chinese has a robust vocabulary of compound words, but think one character to one word as a rough approximation.

The written characters are for the most part abstract collections of brush strokes that have no relation to the meaning of the word. There are exceptions and you may have seen some of them, where the look of the character visually suggests the meaning of the word, but these are the exception not the rule, and, again as a rough approximation, the only way to learn the meaning of Chinese characters is to memorize them, one at a time.

Classical Chinese has a vocabulary of some 30,000 characters, making it a remarkably elegant, poetic form of communication in which a great deal of meaning can be distilled down into a handful of shrewdly-chosen characters, and traditionally this was regarded as one of the shining examples of China's sophisticated civilization. But needless to say, it takes a long time to learn 30,000 characters, meaning written classical Chinese is also a language that can only be used by a small number of highly educated people to communicate with others of their own class. Over 95% of China's vast population is composed of illiterate peasant farmers. Even a modest education is a luxury to the people who spend most of their lives laboring to make sure the next harvest comes in before the last harvest disappears. There's no way any of these people are going to learn classical Chinese.

If mass education is the key to democracy, individual rights, and modernity, as the New Culture Movement believed, then written Chinese was going to have to be simplified. Out of those

30,000 written Chinese characters, most Chinese people in their day-to-day lives get by using a spoken Chinese vocabulary of about 3,000 characters or so, just a tenth of the full classical vocabulary. The New Culture Movement advocated a basic written Chinese that would allow an average person to get by on this modest set of characters, and even a university level intellectual discourse using fewer than 10,000 characters, a much more reasonable educational goal. *New Youth* would itself eventually be published entirely in modernized Chinese, and each issue served as a practical demonstration that one could indeed examine the great issues of the day, review science and art, and tell thought-provoking stories all in a modern idiom for modern Chinese people.

Language reform was a key element of the New Culture movement, but it was not the only front on which the movement pressed for change. Another was modern technology, and in particular, modern medicine. China had a long and storied traditional folk medicine, which was still widely practiced at this time. Most physicians in China practicing Western medicine were foreign missionaries. Many Chinese saw Western medicine at best as alien to Chinese culture, at worst an insidious tool of the foreign devils meant to undermine China and therefore often rejected Western therapies. The New Culture movement dismissed this attitude as mere superstition.

Similarly, the movement rejected many of the traditional Confucian values that permeated Chinese society, especially the Confucian emphasis on hierarchies and the demand for loyalty to one's superiors and respect for one's elders and ancestors, in favor of Western values of individualism and self-determination. In particular, the movement criticized the treatment of women in China, which was pretty repressive even by the standards of the period. The movement opposed arranged marriages and embraced equality for women in the family and the workplace and advocated women's suffrage.

In 1917, another foreign-educated scholar, Cai Yuanpei, became President of Peking University. Cai had previously studied in France and Germany and had served as the Republic of China's Minister of Education. Under his leadership, the 20-year old university would be restructured along the model of German universities. Cai would introduce the principles of academic freedom and faculty governance to the university; he would also invite many of the leaders of the New Culture movement to join the faculty, including Chen Duxiu, whom Cai would appoint to chair the Department of Chinese Literature. Chen moved to Beijing and brought *New Youth* with him.

New Youth grew to become the most read and discussed magazine in China and spawned numerous imitators. I feel obligated to point out, however, that at its peak, the magazine's circulation was only about 18,000 copies per issue, which seems like a tiny number in a nation of 400,000,000 people. It's worth remembering that most Chinese at this time were rural and illiterate, and that these great political and social debates were being held among a tiny number of educated and elite Chinese.

And Peking University would develop into one of the top academic institutions—perhaps *the* top, depending on who you talk to—in all of China and with a world-wide reputation. It would also develop a reputation as a center of intellectual ferment and of new and progressive ideas. Some might say “subversive ideas.”

[music: Chinese Buddhist Ritual]

At about the same time the New Culture Movement was getting up and running in China and Chen Duxiu published his essay “The Year 1916” in *New Youth*, on the other side of the world, in France, the Germans were beginning the Verdun offensive. We already discussed that offensive, and you are well acquainted with Erich von Falkenhayn’s strategy to bleed France, the failure of that strategy, with the Somme offensive, the failure of *that* strategy, and with the terrible loss of life in Europe in 1916. By the end of 1916, all the belligerents in Europe were scrambling to find enough new recruits to replace the many soldiers who had died.

China has the largest population of any nation in the world, about 400,000,000 in 1916, representing more than a quarter of the human race. As the manpower shortage in Europe became more acute, it was inevitable that some would begin to look to China as a way of alleviating that shortage.

Now as I said, at the beginning of the war, the government of Yuan Shikai in Beijing sounded out the Allies about China’s joining the war and was rebuffed. But by 1916, at least some in the Allied governments were willing to reconsider, including John Jordan, the British ambassador to China, who was by this time talking to his own government about the advantages of inviting China to join the war.

Not everyone on the Allied side thought this was a good idea, and the Japanese in particular were dead set against it. Japan aspired to become nothing less than the dominant power in East Asia, and to be recognized as such by the Western powers. To achieve that end, the Japanese were trying desperately to position themselves as the one indispensable ally of the West in a region of the world otherwise hostile to Western interests and Western values. That meant that every time the Chinese government sought to prove China’s value to the West, it was also, at least implicitly, an effort to undermine Japan.

But as the labor shortage grew, first France and then Britain began exploring the use of Chinese labor behind the front lines in non-combat positions. The British were already using thousands of laborers from their imperial holdings in the West Indies, India, Egypt, South Africa and elsewhere, and the French were, too. By May 1916, the French government began to recruit Chinese laborers, mostly young men under the age of 35, to work in France.

It’s not clear exactly how this program began. China was officially neutral and so its government could not assist the Allies officially, but Chinese and European businesses were set up in China. The French and British governments would contract with these businesses for laborers. The

businesses would recruit Chinese workers, often at the British-controlled port of Weihaiwei, or Port Edward, on the Shandong Peninsula. Some were shipped to Europe by sea via the Suez Canal. Others were transported from China to Vancouver and then by train across North America and then on to Europe. Recall that Chinese immigration to the United States had been banned altogether by the Chinese Exclusion Act back in 1882. In Canada, would-be Chinese immigrants—and *only* Chinese immigrants—had to pay a special tax of \$500 per person for the right to settle in Canada, a sum of money so large it was effectively a ban, and so these transiting workers were closely monitored, lest they try to slip off the trains and settle in North America.

Those Chinese workers were also excluded from British soil, but they labored behind the front lines in France for both the French and British Armies. They unloaded ships and rail cars, harvested timber, built roads, railroads, and buildings, and dug many of those trenches you've been hearing so much about. This was mostly unskilled labor, although when the British began introducing tanks on the Western Front, many of the mechanics who maintained and repaired them were Chinese.

The Chinese government must have eventually learned of these workers, even if they didn't know about it all along, but they chose to look the other way. If China was not to be allowed to join the Allies officially, she could help out unofficially, and collect IOUs along the way.

In 1917, the year so many things changed, among them was China and her relationship to the Allies. On February 17, 1917, just two and a half weeks after Germany reinstated unrestricted submarine warfare, the French transport ship *Athos* was torpedoed and sunk in the Mediterranean as she was transporting some 900 Chinese laborers. A total of 754 people aboard her were killed, most of them Chinese citizens. Sadly, we don't even know the names of the Chinese victims, as no records were kept. Even so, the war was no longer merely a quarrel among the foreigners. China now had its own grievance against Germany.

Then the United States entered the war. The US is itself a Pacific power, and one that historically has had commercial ties to China and has looked askance on European efforts to control Chinese trade. Remember President McKinley's Open Door policy? At the same time, the US relationship with Japan has been growing tenser, as we have seen in a number of past episodes, and these two nations are becoming rivals in the west Pacific. And so the US government opposed Japan's efforts to assert her supremacy in the region and reduce China to something like a client state. The US encouraged Chinese entry into the war and urged Britain and France to do likewise. This changed the dynamics within the alliance.

But it was not clear that the Chinese government was ready to take this step. The prime minister, Duan Qirui, who you'll recall was a holdover from the rule of Yuan Shikai, wanted China in the war, but many other government figures, including the current president, Li Yuanhong, opposed it. President Li finally dismissed Duan in May of 1917. A few weeks later, a monarchist general named Zhang Xun attempted a coup, moving his army into Beijing and declaring a restoration of

the Qing Dynasty. But the coup failed as anti-monarchist commanders took back control of the capital. President Li resigned, Duan was restored as prime minister, and China declared war on Germany and Austria a month later, on August 14. China would not send military units to Europe, but the Chinese government would assume direct control of the provision of civilian laborers to the Allies.

Unfortunately for China, entering the war would not bring national unity, or end the internal conflicts among the warlords, but would rather intensify them, as foreign loans were used to build up regional military units. China's internal divisions are only going to get worse.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening; I hope you enjoyed it. I'd also like to thank Wolf for his donation, and thank you, Guy, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep the words flowing and the bits going for themselves and for everyone, so if you'd like to enjoy the karmic benefits that come from being a donor or a patron, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com. You can also help out by tweeting and posting about the podcast on social media, and by leaving a rating and review at the iTunes store. And thanks to all of you for helping out.

And I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century* for a religious-themed episode, as we look at the baseball player who packed them in at the Glory Barn and the peasant girl who saw...well, I'll leave it to you to decide what she saw. The Visionary and the Evangelist, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In the city of Changsha, the capital of Hunan province in the southwest of China, a friend of Chen Duxiu named Yang Changji was teaching at the First Normal School. One of his students was a young man named Mao Zedong. Mao was studying to be a teacher, but was also a passionate student of politics and philosophy. On his own he had studied the works of Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Jacques Rousseau, and other 19th century liberals. Yang identified Mao as his most intelligent and most handsome student and urged him to begin reading Chen's *New Youth* magazine. Mao embraced the New Culture Movement and *New Youth* was soon publishing Mao's own writings by 1917, when Mao was still just 23 years old.

[music: Closing War Theme]