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Aftermath of the Revolution: Experiments in Western-style Democratic Politics in Early Republican China

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Summary:

On January 1, 1912, the Provisional Government of the Republic of China was established in Nanjing with Sun Yat-sen as the provisional president. Later on February 12, the Qing emperor abdicated the throne. With the collapse of the Qing, China entered into the Republican era. New opportunities presented themselves, but historical development does not always conform to the people's will. China gradually moved in the opposite direction – military leaders took control and conflicts among different warlords devastated the entire country. To this day the Chinese academic community continues to try and understand the reasons for the successes and failures of that time.

Key features of the early part of the Republican era include the proliferation of political organizations, and the dynamism of legislative organs. However, simultaneously, there was also the intensification of political struggle and armed confrontation as the warlords rose in China. Meanwhile, at Beijing itself, the Republican government was thwarted at every step by President Yuan Shikai and the Beiyang faction of warlords that he led. Despite aspiring for the highest democratic ideals, the post-1911 Revolution government crucially failed to achieve the separation of the government and the military, a military controlled by the civilian government, party competition and so on. The revolutionaries might have possessed democratic ideals on their side but they did not have their own military forces to defend their achievements. Without adequate strategic planning, they failed to enter into alliance with more political forces. Poor organization and weak leadership inevitably led to the failure of the democratic experiment in early republican China.

Remarks: Prof. Manoranjan Mohanty, Chairperson, ICS

Prof. Wang's presentation covered three important aspects of the early post-1911 Revolution period: the separation of powers, the cabinet system and the legislative system (Canyiyuan). He also highlighted some reasons as to why the democratic experiment failed in Asia's first republic. Among these, he pointed out the immature political conditions and the lack of a democratic culture in China and of the required consciousness among the people. However, this point of view is debatable. All democracies

were born under such circumstances and hence the reasons for the eventual failure of the Xinhai Revolution require further examination.

From the theoretical point of view, at least three broad aspects can be highlighted in Prof. Wang's paper. One, there is an important role of military power in ensuring the success of any revolutionary movement. Both Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong were cognizant of this factor, if to differing degrees. Two, the social bases of any revolutionary movement are important. In the case of China, post-1911, those that once served in the Qing government continued as part of the government even as intellectuals continued to push for greater change. All told, the social bases of the Xinhai Revolution remained limited. Three, the role of foreign powers in China during this period cannot be discounted. With their interference and picking sides among the warlords, they had a role to play in the eventual failure of the Revolution and of democracy in China.

Brief Bio:

Wang Chaoguang is Professor and director of the Department of Chinese Republican History at the Institute of Modern History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences since 1998. He is currently also the Deputy Director of the Institute of Modern History at CASS. He has written numerous articles and books on the history of the Republican China.