

RANA MITTER
China's War With Japan,
1937-1945
The Struggle for Survival



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I

As Close as Lips and Teeth: China's Fall, Japan's Rise

The clash between China and Japan did not begin in 1937. It had been brewing for decades. The story of the first half of China's twentieth century is the story of its love-hate relationship with its smaller island neighbour. The hatred became more prominent as the years went on, reaching its climax with the devastation visited on China's territory by the atrocities of the 1930s and 1940s. But in earlier years, Japan had been mentor as well as monster. It was an educator: thousands of Chinese students studied there. It was a refuge: when Chinese dissenters such as the prominent revolutionary Sun Yat-sen were threatened by their own government, they fled to Tokyo. And it was a model: China's reformist elites looked to Japan to see how an Asian power could militarize, industrialize and stand tall in the community of nations. For good or ill, a large proportion of the history of twentieth-century China was made in Japan. It became a commonplace in both countries that Japan and China were 'as close as lips and teeth'.¹

But if they were so close, how did the two nations come to fight one of the bloodiest wars in history? To understand the origins of their conflict, we must return to the late nineteenth century. To be Chinese during this period was to face a depressing range of political problems – floods, famines and foreign invasions among them. And looming over all of these challenges was the greatest existential crisis in China's history. The country's elites had come to realize that they were no longer in charge of their own destiny. What had once been a self-confident civilization was now the victim of a new international system in which industrialization and imperialism shaped the world. That decline was doubly difficult for many Chinese to understand because it seemed to have come about so quickly. Just a century earlier, many observers in the

West had felt that China's empire was surely the greatest on earth: Voltaire, for one, had criticized his native France by comparing it unfavourably with China. For centuries China's imperial dynasties had ruled over one of the most populous and sophisticated societies on earth, and for nearly a thousand years China had used a system of competitive examinations to recruit government bureaucrats, long before such a system operated in the West.

The cultural influence of China was at its zenith during this period. The orderly, conservative philosophy of Confucianism, which underpinned Chinese statecraft, spread across East Asia, shaping societies beyond China's borders, including Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia. Chinese calligraphy, painting and metalwork became renowned across the region, and the country developed a dynamic commercial economy: goods such as exotic fruits from the warm south made their way onto the sophisticated palates of the prosperous merchants in the cities of central and northern China. The rulers of Japan, in contrast, began to feel vulnerable. Concern about the arrival of Spanish and Portuguese missionaries eager to convert the Japanese to Christianity led the Tokugawa family, who ruled on behalf of the emperor, to impose a policy known as *kaikin* or *sakoku* from 1635: on pain of death, no Japanese were permitted to leave the country, and foreign trade was heavily restricted with Dutch, Chinese and Korean traders permitted only on the artificial island of Dejima in Nagasaki harbour and on outlying islands.² The Chinese court was much less concerned about the threat from abroad. When the British diplomat Lord Macartney attempted to open up trade between China and Britain in 1793, the emperor sent him away empty-handed, declaring loftily: 'We have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your manufactures.'³ Still, despite this imperial insouciance, China was highly integrated with the world economy, and was very far from being closed or isolated. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) the distinctive blue-and-white pottery of Jingdezhen in central China graced elegant homes in eighteenth-century Britain and France. The spread of New World crops such as sweet potato and maize enabled the Chinese to move west and cultivate large parts of their territory that had previously been considered barren. Between 1700 and 1800 China's population doubled from 150 to 300 million people.⁴

The best example of China's cultural power over its neighbours is the

founding of the final dynasty, the Qing, in 1644. The dynasty was established by ethnic Manchus who rode into the Chinese heartland from the lands of the northeast. Even though the Manchus, like the Mongols and other non-Chinese invaders before them, had conquered China's territory, they still respected China's powerful social norms. The greatest emperors of the Qing, Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) and Qianlong (r. 1735–96), sponsored large scholarly encyclopedias and wrote poetry to show how attuned they were to traditional Chinese culture (even though they maintained many customary Manchu forms at court and in wider society).

Yet China's success contained the seeds of its future problems. Although the country's territory expanded during the eighteenth century, its bureaucracy remained small, as did its ability to extract taxes. The lack of government revenue meant that military spending was low. This problem would be highlighted when a new threat appeared in the early nineteenth century: imperialism from the west. The new arrivals were different from previous conquerors who had established new dynasties. They did not share a Chinese view of the world, nor of China's central place within it. They were led by the British, who were invigorated by the economic gains of industrialization and their final defeat of Napoleonic France at the battle of Waterloo in 1815. British traders had established the East India Company in 1600 and now sought a market for the products that emerged from their possessions in southern Asia.⁵

One crop that grew particularly well was the opium poppy, which produced a sticky black paste that could be smoked for a powerful narcotic effect. The drug quickly took off when introduced to China. Opium had in fact been known in China for centuries, used largely as a medicine and aphrodisiac by elite consumers. Mass-market opium was a British innovation. The imperial court became convinced that a powerful and destructive force was being unleashed upon the population, and Lin Zexu, a high official of the Qing, was sent to the port of Guangzhou (Canton) to destroy the stocks of the drug held by the British traders there. Lin was successful in the short term, capturing the opium after besieging the traders in their 'factories', but he unwittingly provoked a war. Lord Palmerston, the British Foreign Secretary, authorized the use of force to punish the Chinese for their supposed insolence toward the British Crown, and the first Opium War (1839–42) began. Chinese

defences turned out to be no match for destructive British firepower, backed up by gunboats, and the court was forced into humiliating surrender.

In 1842 representatives of the Qing dynasty signed the first of what are still known today as the 'unequal treaties', the Treaty of Nanjing. It forced open new ports for foreign trade, including Shanghai, and ceded the island of Hong Kong to Britain, without any reciprocal benefits for the Chinese themselves. The treaty marked the start of the 'century of humiliation', during which China lost control of its sovereignty and was at the mercy of foreign powers; even today, the phrase has the power to call up collective memories of a dark period in China's history. Over the next few decades the Western powers – first Britain, then the United States and France – would launch further wars against China, each victory gaining them greater concessions and territory. For the Chinese, the greatest source of resentment was the establishment of 'extraterritoriality', a provision designed to overcome the supposed inadequacies of Chinese law. It decreed that foreigners from nations covered by the treaties could not be forced to settle legal disputes or face criminal charges in Chinese courts, even if the events in question had taken place on Chinese soil. Instead, the two sides would have to go to a 'Mixed' court under foreign authority.⁶

Shanghai was the key. A small trading city for most of China's history, and eclipsed for all that time by nearby Nanjing and Yangzhou, modern Shanghai was created by imperialism. Trading rights there were granted under the terms of the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing which had followed the first Opium War. Although the treaty was a humiliation for the Chinese, it allowed the growth of a unique port. At the centre of the city were two 'concession' areas (that is, territory under foreign sovereignty). The French Concession was a small French colony within the city. The International Settlement was more complex. Not a formal colony, it was controlled by the Shanghai Municipal Council, to which until 1928 no Chinese could be elected; the majority of its councillors were British (although Americans, and then Japanese, also served). The settlers, who called themselves 'Shanghaianders' (as if the city were its own country), were not directly accountable to London but were widely identified with British interests. Outside the concessions, the Chinese government of the day had control. Gangsters took advantage of the split sovereignty of the city to maximize revenues from drugs, prostitu-

tion and gambling, most famously the notorious Green Gang under Du Yuesheng. Yet the city's colonial history also provided an opportunity for young nationalist Chinese to see modernity at close quarters. The neon lights and fancy department stores of Shanghai became legendary, even many thousands of kilometres inland.

The Qing dynasty had to reconsider its whole strategy of dealing with the Western world. Two years after the Treaty of Nanjing was signed, the senior courtier Qiyong tried to reinterpret the situation for the Daoguang emperor in terms suited to the old imperial world. The foreigners 'are constantly making arbitrary interpretations of things,' he explained, 'and it is difficult to enlighten them by means of reason'. The court must not 'fight with them over empty names', but rather aim to 'achieve our larger scheme' of making them behave according to Chinese norms.⁷ Qiyong hoped that the British could be conciliated as previous foreign invaders from central Asia and the steppes had been appeased in centuries past. But it became clear that this tactic underestimated the fundamentally different nature of the new threat. The imperialists sought to occupy not just land, but minds.

The treaties allowed Christian missionaries to travel extensively in the interior of China. Missionaries were not always welcome, as their presence was often backed (implicitly at least) by the presence of foreign gunboats. Yet Christianity did find many converts in China, particularly as the faith also brought new educational and medical teaching in its wake.

However, nobody could have foreseen the terrible consequences of one particular conversion in the 1850s. A young man named Hong Xiuquan from Guangdong province had repeatedly failed the examinations for the civil service bureaucracy. After his fourth failure, he fell into a trance, in which he recalled various Christian tracts distributed by an American missionary many years previously. Hong's visions led him to believe that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ, sent to earth to drive the Manchus from China and establish the *Taiping Tianguo* – the 'heavenly kingdom of great peace'. Hong founded a movement that became known as the Taiping, and despite its unpromising beginnings, it snowballed into the greatest civil war that China, and perhaps the world, has ever seen. Between 1856 and 1864 the Taipings established what was effectively a separate state within China; its capital was at the great city of Nanjing, and millions of people lived under its rule. The

Taiping was nominally a Christian regime, but it espoused variations in doctrine (such as acknowledging Hong Xiuquan as Jesus's younger brother) that put off most missionaries and other foreigners from joining forces with it. The Taipings also enacted strict reforms such as the abolition of opium and made moves to redistribute property and land. 'Nowhere will inequality exist,' one Taiping notice declared, 'and no one not be well fed and clothed.'⁸

The Qing dynasty was desperate to put the rebellion down. But decades of atrophy meant that the official Qing armies, inheritors of the Manchu warrior tradition, were no longer capable of defeating a large and fanatical rebel group. Instead, the court decided to contain the problem by putting it in the hands of trusted local officials, who raised 'New Armies' to defeat the Taipings. The New Armies were highly successful, and the rebellion was finally defeated, although not without massive bloodshed: some 100,000 people were reported killed at the last battle of Nanjing in 1864. The Qing had also exacerbated another weakness in their rule. Although the immediate problem of the Taiping was solved, the devolution of military authority from the centre to the provinces had laid the grounds for a culture where autonomous militarists, often known as 'warlords', rather than a central Chinese government could lay down the law.⁹

This fractured, militarized China would become more and more vulnerable, creating a political system that opened the way for the eventual war with Japan. Without the diffusion of power in the years after 1860, it seems far less likely that Japan would have invaded in the 1930s. Militarization and the loss of control by the central government led to a wider culture of violence that rocked the country for the last fifty years of the Qing dynasty's rule. That violence found one target in the increasingly resented foreign imperialist presence. Although China never formally lost its own sovereignty, foreigners were free to roam across its territory with little fear of legal consequences for actions they took, and this led to many troubling encounters between the Chinese and the intruders. In the streets of Shanghai scenes of rickshaw drivers being abused by British customers were an everyday occurrence. In 1900 the Boxer uprising broke out, a peasant rebellion that gained its name from the religiously influenced martial arts practised by its proponents. The rebellion was spurred on by a great drought that came on top of widespread, grinding poverty, and it saw immense violence against

foreigners and Chinese Christians in the villages of north China, culminating in a two-month siege of the foreign legations in Beijing. The rebels whipped up feeling in drought-ridden districts with xenophobic slogans such as 'When the foreign devils have all been killed, a heavy rain will fall.'¹⁰ Drought and famine also increased the level of local violence, as militias formed in communities that no longer trusted the state to defend them against marauding bandits or corrupt officials.

It was into this vulnerable, post-Taiping China that Chiang Kai-shek was born in 1887. Chiang remained an enigma even to many of his closest associates for the whole of his life. He was stubborn, manipulative and callous, but also had firm commitments coming from his experience as a Bible-reading Confucian firmly committed to revolutionary anti-imperialism. From his earliest years, he was seized by the conviction that China must be reunited, and that the power of foreign imperialism must be eradicated from its territory. All his military and political life was spent in pursuit of this goal. But his tactics could lead him to adopt intricate and often deceptive strategies: he was a master at playing off his colleagues against one another. Chiang, observed one British journalist in the 1930s, 'has never hesitated to forgive his enemies ... or to betray his friends.'¹¹ Born to a family of salt-merchants near Ningbo, in Zhejiang province, the prosperous central coastal area around the Yangtze delta, Chiang received an education which was highly traditional in many ways, and learned the values of the Confucian system of thought, including ideas of propriety, righteousness and shame. But he would also be shaped by a very new institution in the early twentieth century, the military academy. In addition he would be China's first leader to have experience of the outside world: a youthful visit to the newly formed Soviet Russia shaped a lifetime of visceral hatred for Communism, and a Japanese military academy gave him insights into the enemy he would face one day. During the Second World War itself, his visits to India and Egypt would shape his conviction that a post-war China must fight imperialism and stand tall among the family of nations. Li Zongren, an ally with whom Chiang would have a turbulent relationship, confirmed that he had one key quality for leadership: 'he loved to make decisions'.¹²

In the second half of the nineteenth century, while China floundered, its traditional 'little brother' had taken a very different path. After the first Opium War, it was Japan's turn to confront the West, this time led by

the United States. In 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo Harbour, requesting that Japan abandon its centuries of near-isolation and open itself to a wider range of trading partners. Perry's demand was politely issued, but it was backed up by the force of gunboats. The next decade and a half saw a major crisis in Japan as the shoguns, the Tokugawa family who acted as regents on behalf of the emperor, found they had no solutions to offer to ward off the foreigners. One scion of the family, Tokugawa Nariaki, advocated all-out war. 'If we put our trust in war the whole country's morale will be increased,' he claimed, 'and even if we sustain a defeat we will in the end defeat the foreigner.'¹³

But few agreed with him, and the political turmoil caused by the foreign threat led not to a war against the Americans but a coup against the shoguns. After a short civil war in 1868, the Tokugawas were replaced by a very different sort of aristocratic elite, who decided that the way to repel Western imperialism was to embrace wholesale modernization. 'Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world,' declared the Charter Oath of the new regime, 'so as to invigorate the foundations of imperial rule.'¹⁴ The reformers carried out their actions in the name of the emperor, whose reign-title was Meiji ('brilliant rule'), and the period has therefore become known as the 'Meiji restoration'. In reality, it was nothing less than a revolution. Japan had been a feudal aristocratic society, largely agrarian, with little foreign contact. Christianity and firearms, both dangerous influences that might upset the social order, had been outlawed. By 1900, within just three decades, Japan had been transformed. It had a disciplined, conscripted army, and a constitution and parliamentary system. It was Asia's most heavily industrialized society, exporting goods around the world. By the start of the twentieth century, Japan had nearly 60,000 kilometres of railway tracks and 700,000 tons of shipping. Its leaders had created a modernized, industrialized state in record time.¹⁵

Japan had also secured another essential element of a powerful modern nation state in the late nineteenth century: an empire. In 1894-5 Japan took on China for control of the Korean Peninsula, traditionally an area of Chinese influence. Twenty thousand Japanese troops made a daring assault on the fort of Weihaiwei, on the coast of China's northern Shandong province, and turned their guns on the ships of the Chinese navy, sinking five of its finest vessels. China had to send diplomats Prince

Gong and Li Hongzhang to the city of Shimonoseki in Japan to sign a humiliating treaty; as Gong put it, he was 'piecing together the cup which the present ministers had smashed to the floor'.¹⁶ The Japanese not only claimed control of Korea (which they annexed formally in 1910), but the island of Taiwan as well (which remained a Japanese colony until 1945). In 1904-5 Japan pulled off an even greater coup. It fought for influence in Manchuria, the northeastern province of China, where Russia had established a colonial presence. Japan paid a heavy price: over 80,000 of its troops were killed by wounds or disease. But thanks to Japan's military skill, the war ended with Russia's defeat. It was the first time that an Asian power had overcome a European one, and the achievement drew admiration from colonized and vulnerable peoples around the world.¹⁷

In September 1905 the two powers met at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to sign a treaty mediated by President Theodore Roosevelt (who would later win the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts). Russia had to hand over the rights to the Liaodong Peninsula, a strip of land on the east coast of Manchuria that contained the strategic port of Dalian. The Japanese then built on their gains by setting up the South Manchurian Railway. Much more than a transport network, this was a commercial semi-governmental organization modelled in part on the British East India Company. It gave Japan a strong foothold on the Chinese mainland. The Russo-Japanese War also had a powerful impact on the Japanese public. Songs such as 'Comrade' became popular hits, with lines such as 'Here, many hundreds of leagues from home, / The red setting sun of distant Manchuria / Shines down on a stone at the edge of a field, / Beneath which my friend lies.'¹⁸ Such songs fuelled a growing feeling that Japan had earned its territories in China at a high cost, and that this sacrifice gave the Japanese a special role in their neighbour's land.

This special status was spelled out most clearly by the stationing in Manchuria of the Kwantung Army. This force, initially made up of some 10,000 men, was supposed to protect the interests of Japanese citizens and businesses in the region, in particular the South Manchuria Railway Company (SMR, or *Manitetsu*), which was the primary instrument of Japanese colonialism in the region. By 1933 its numbers had increased dramatically to over 114,000, and it gave Japan a powerful advantage in its quest to control north China.¹⁹

By the early twentieth century, Japan was an Asian power that had

remodelled itself as an empire with continental ambitions. In stark contrast, China had been thoroughly humiliated. It had lost its first all-out war with its 'little brother', and then had to accept that rival imperial powers, including Japan, could occupy large parts of its territory with impunity. Feelings of resentment at Japan's actions were mixed with respect for that nation's ability to regenerate itself. Even the Chinese Guangxu emperor expressed his admiration for the Meiji reforms in a conversation with Japanese prime minister Ito Hirobumi in 1898: 'The government of your honourable country has been praised by all nations... we request Your Excellency [Ito] to tell our princes and great ministers... the process and methods of reform, and give them advice.²⁰ Just a few decades earlier, it would have been unthinkable that the emperor, the 'Son of Heaven', would ask an official from the small islands to the east for advice on any topic whatsoever.

The growing strength of Japan led many Chinese intellectuals to think of new ways out of the crisis, drawing on the political philosophy of the West, the region that had dominated China so successfully. Yan Fu, who studied naval technology in London, became the first translator into Chinese of Herbert Spencer, the Victorian social scientist who coined the term 'survival of the fittest'. Spencer argued that races and peoples, not just species, were competing for mastery. His central ideas were later characterized as 'social Darwinism' and are now dismissed as pseudo-science, but they proved very popular in East Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as they seemed to provide a rational explanation for the decline of the Asian powers, as well as a potential solution. (The young Mao Zedong, among others, was deeply influenced by such ideas. He used them to voice his opposition to the traditional Confucian respect for order, harmony and hierarchy, instead embracing the idea that violence might be the necessary transformative power that would drag China into modernity. What China needed was a man who would 'charge on horseback amid the clash of arms ... to shake the mountains by one's cries'.²¹)

Despite such new thinking, the Qing's grip on power became ever weaker even as Japan gained strength. Attempts at reform were half-hearted and were stymied by conservative figures at court, including Cixi, the empress dowager who acted as a force behind the emperor's throne and was vehemently opposed to political change. The Boxer uprising of 1900 had proved a disaster for the dynasty: Cixi and the

court had come out in support of the rebels and their anti-foreign campaign, only to see the Boxers crushed by a 20,000-strong force made up of the soldiers of eight nations (including Japan). The dynasty was made to agree to a massive indemnity payment to the foreign powers. There was a final effort to turn things around in the first decade of the twentieth century. From 1902, the dynasty instituted the Xinzheng (New Government) reforms, which drew strongly on the Japanese example. These were designed to turn China into a constitutional monarchy, with elections steadily being introduced at a local, then provincial, then national level.

The reforms late in the Qing might have had some chance of success in a country that was already more unified and prosperous. However, the dynasty was running low on people who had a vested interest in its survival. There was a serious agricultural crisis in the countryside; military power had now been diffused to the local level; and the newly emergent middle classes, visible in new institutions such as Chambers of Commerce, formed a locus of power that owed little to the central government. For nearly a thousand years, Chinese dynasties had held sway through their control over the bureaucracy, entry to which was dependent on a series of examinations. But the examinations themselves had become ossified, demanding knowledge of classical precedents that seemed to have little relevance to the pressing problems of the day. In 1905, in one of its boldest moves, the Qing abolished the traditional examinations in favour of a new system demanding study in sciences and foreign languages. However, this alienated large numbers of elites who had spent years – in some cases, decades – of their lives studying for the bureaucratic examinations, and now found their ladder of opportunity snatched away.

The end of the old system created new opportunities for learning that had never been available to an older generation of Chinese. Some 30,000 Chinese students travelled to Japan for further study in the three decades leading up to 1937. This was a sharp reversal of past practice: Asians had always come to China to learn, but now Japan was the mentor. Chiang Kai-shek, for instance, attended the Shimbu Gakkō in Tokyo, a school set up to enable Chinese students to study military strategy. Among his fellow students was He Yingqin, who would become his minister of war during the conflict with Japan. Chiang was not a popular student, regarded as aloof and withdrawn, but he was respected

for his capacity for sheer hard work. Chiang's three years in Japan would instil in him admiration for that country's sense of order, discipline and commitment to modernization; but its imperialist intentions would also make him deeply wary.²²

By the late nineteenth century, many Chinese despaired of the possibilities of gradual reform, and began to plot nothing short of an overthrow of the Qing dynasty. A new political philosophy was on the rise, personified in the revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen, a Hong Kong-trained physician who was also a practising Christian. Sun became convinced that the Qing would never revive China's fortunes, and spent much of the 1880s and 1890s moving among Chinese communities overseas and forging links with traditional secret societies, fomenting opposition to the dynasty. He even led a secret organization in China, the Tongmenghui, aimed at overthrowing it. The Qing, in turn, put a price on his head, forcing him to flee to Japan. He failed to ignite an uprising, but his patriotic credentials and charismatic presence inspired many Chinese nationalists, including the young Wang Jingwei.²³

Wang Jingwei is less well remembered today than his contemporaries Chiang Kai-shek or Mao Zedong, who would also seek to lead China during the war with Japan. Yet in the first decade of the twentieth century, he was better known than either. When he met individuals, Wang often appeared diffident, but in front of a crowd he was transformed. A Japanese journalist who knew him declared: 'He always spoke in a very, very low voice in small groups . . . But in a crowd of three thousand, he was just like a crazy lion! He was a great orator!'²⁴ Wang was born in 1883 in Guangdong province, although his family originated from Zhejiang, the same province as Chiang. Like his two contemporaries, Wang was seized by an early conviction that China needed salvation, and that he was the man to do it. In 1905 Wang joined the Tongmenghui and quickly rose in influence. Unlike Chiang or Mao, he gained national prominence early with his daring public persona, and his public-speaking skills brought him great fame. Wang enjoyed his glamorous image: he was startlingly handsome and would build on his charismatic good looks by writing poetry in which he portrayed himself as a selfless patriot who cared little for his own life. Wang Jingwei likewise chose Japan for his further studies, arriving in 1904 for a course in law and politics. While there, he served as one of the editors of the *Minbao* newspaper,

whose passionate rhetoric called for revolution in China, and one of whose readers was the youthful Chiang Kai-shek.

Aged only twenty-two, Wang emerged from his Japanese experience as a fully committed revolutionary comrade of Sun Yat-sen. Sun and Wang both hailed from the southern province of Guangdong, and throughout his life Wang would associate with other figures from this region, which had always looked askance at rule from the northerners in far-off Beijing. Wang travelled extensively with Sun in Southeast Asia, using his rhetorical skills to inspire the region's ethnic Chinese to support the overthrow of the dynasty. But revolution seemed unlikely. In 1910 Wang decided that he would substitute action for words: he masterminded a plot to assassinate the prince regent, Prince Qun, with a bomb timed to go off under his carriage. He was assisted by a young woman named Chen Bijun. Chen was the daughter of a trader from Southeast Asia, and she was a feisty and provocative figure as dedicated to revolution as Wang himself. Soon after meeting, they were married, and Chen took a full role in all Wang's activities. Some years later Wang would remark, 'She is my wife, but she is also my revolutionary comrade, and for that reason, I don't find it easy to make important decisions without considering her views.'²⁵

The plot was discovered, and Wang was arrested and sentenced to death. His sentence was then commuted to life in prison. The reasons for his reprieve remain unclear, but one factor must have been the extraordinary fame that his action brought him. (Some more fanciful suggestions hint that a highly placed lady at court was swayed by his extraordinary good looks.) To many patriots, the assassination attempt gave him the status of a true national hero, and the dynasty could not afford to have him become a martyr. Wang wrote poetry that burnished his own image as a patriot willing to die to save China from the dynasty which oppressed it.²⁶ To explain his turn to violence, Wang referred to the newspaper editorials he wrote as a young man studying in Japan. 'These articles were written in ink,' declared Wang; 'I wanted to translate them into blood.'²⁷ The combination of melodrama and commitment was typical of the man. Driven, ambitious, vain, and also shaped by a streak of recklessness, Wang's willingness to throw the dice when the odds were long would shape his political life all the way into wartime.

Young Chinese like Wang took great inspiration from the activities of the Russian nihilists and terrorists, with their anarchistic philosophy.

Not all Russian anarchists were violent, but those who were glorified their use of violence. Sofya Perovskaya, the Russian revolutionary who had masterminded the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 and was subsequently executed, was so much an inspiration to the young Chinese writer Ding Ling in the 1920s that she named the lead character of her most famous story, 'The Diary of Miss Sophia', after her. Wang Jingwei, as a thrower of bombs at Manchu princes, was a direct inheritor of Perovskaya's legacy, although he was fortunate enough to escape her fate.

Despite the upheavals in society in the late Qing, there was no certainty that revolution was in the wings. Few could have foreseen the consequences of events in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in the autumn of 1911. The city was alive with rumours that the Qing government wished to sell railway rights in the region to foreign interests. In this atmosphere of unrest, a small group of revolutionary soldiers in the local garrison were discovered (but not captured) in the midst of their bomb-making preparations for rebellion. They had been planning attacks on local officials, but realized that they must seize their moment or be arrested. They marched to the military headquarters and held up the commander at gunpoint. They gave him a choice: be shot, or announce on their behalf that on that day, 10 October, he was declaring the city's independence from the Qing dynasty. He did so, and within days, there was a chain reaction as city after city declared independence from the regime. Provincial assemblies, filled with the representatives of the new, politically empowered merchant class, all declared themselves part of a new Republic and named Sun Yat-sen as their chosen president. (Sun himself was not in China but in America on a fundraising trip when the revolution broke out.) The news quickly spread among young patriots ready to bring down the dynasty. Chiang rushed home from Japan and gained his first experience of combat by commanding hastily assembled revolutionary troops in his home province of Zhejiang.

The rule of the Qing proved highly brittle. A local uprising quickly ignited and was sufficient to bring the whole system down. By the end of the year, the dynasty was on the brink of collapse. Yuan Shikai, the warlord who controlled the Beiyang army, the biggest in North China, went to the court with a proposal. In return for the abdication of the six-year-old emperor, Puyi, Yuan would ensure that the imperial household was given suitable accommodation and an income. On 12 February

1912 the last emperor of China abdicated, and China formally became a Republic.

At first, there were high hopes for the Republic. But from the earliest days, it was clear that power lay not with the political parties and Parliament, but with the militarists. Yuan Shikai swiftly used his military strength to force Sun Yat-sen's resignation and install himself as president, with the complicity of foreign powers that favoured a military man in charge rather than the less predictable Sun. Wang Jingwei was released from prison just after the revolution broke out, and Yuan offered him the premiership of the new Republic. Wang declined; rather in the manner of a traditional Confucian scholar, he chose to withdraw from political life rather than be corrupted by a flawed system. Others carried the mantle. General elections were set for late 1912, and Sun ran at the head of his newly formed Nationalist Party. He handily gained the largest grouping in Parliament, with 269 out of 596 seats. But China's experiment in electoral democracy, while real, was very short lived. On 20 March 1913 an assassin walked up to Song Jiaoren, the Nationalists' brilliant young nominee for prime minister, and shot him. Song died of his wounds soon afterward. Everyone assumed the assassin had been sent by Yuan Shikai. Yuan quickly dissolved Parliament and banned the Nationalist Party. Sun fled to Japan, deeply disillusioned.

China's new Republic was plunged into turmoil. Europe became caught up in its own crisis just a year later, as the Great War broke out. This gave Japan, now unquestionably the strongest power in the region, the opportunity to bolster its own position in China while the Europeans were distracted. In January 1915 the government of Prime Minister Okuma Shigenobu presented Yuan Shikai with a set of territorial and political demands that would give Japan immense advantages in everything from trading rights to the placement of Japanese 'advisers' within the Chinese government. Yuan's position was still weak, and in May thirteen of the original demands were formalized by treaty. Yuan remained president until 1916, when he died of uraemia. For the next decade, China was split among warring militarist factions. Although the international community recognized whichever government was installed in Beijing at any given moment, many felt that China was a geographical expression rather than a country.

The early Republican era was not all bleak. Despite the chaos, it led

to one of the finest flowerings of culture in China's modern history. In 1915 progressives launched a 'New Culture' movement that aimed to liberate China from the constraints of outdated thinking. The movement gathered pace after Yuan's death, sparked by the 1919 signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the Allied campaign against Germany in the First World War. Under the Treaty, Germany had to give up its territories on Chinese soil, along with all its other colonies around the world. The Chinese assumed that the territories would be restored to the young Republic, as a reward for the efforts of the nearly 100,000 Chinese workers who had been sent to the Western Front in Europe to assist the British and French. But the territories were awarded instead to Japan. The Western Allies turned out to have made simultaneous secret agreements with both China and Japan in order to bring them both in on the Allied side. Once again, Japan's actions on the international stage were wreaking havoc with China's internal politics.

The reaction to this news in Beijing was swift and angry. One student at a public meeting threatened to kill himself with a knife in protest. His fellow students quickly mobilized, and on 4 May 1919 three thousand students from the capital's finest colleges marched through the Legation quarter of the city and set fire to the house of a government minister whom they condemned as a 'traitor to the nation' – an apologist for Japanese interests. The students sparked a wider movement that vowed to use 'Mr Science and Mr Democracy' to revive a society suffering from 'warlordism within, and imperialism from outside'. The demonstration was over in a few hours, but the aftershocks helped to transform Chinese society and culture for decades to come. The New Culture movement became intertwined with the 'May Fourth Movement' (commemorating the demonstration). Patriotic Chinese demanded technological development and political reform that could rescue China from its seemingly eternal weakness.²⁸

In 1921, amid this upheaval, a fledgling group – the Chinese Communist Party – held its first congress. Socialism was one of the many Western ideas that had flowed into China late in the Qing dynasty, and radical exponents of the doctrine were further inspired by the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917: Li Dazhao, head librarian of Peking University, declared: 'The victory of Bolshevism . . . is the victory of the spirit of common awakening in the heart of each individual among mankind of the twentieth century.'²⁹ Chen Duxiu, the university's dean

of humanities, was at the meeting (as was one of Li Dazhao's library assistants, a young man named Mao Zedong). The assembled figures all felt that China's social problems, not least the burning question of foreign imperialism on Chinese soil, needed a radical solution. Yet even these optimists could not deny the size of the crisis that faced the country. The revolution seemed to have failed. How could China save itself?