

## Preface

The Chinese state has been the subject of fierce debates since the reformers and revolutionaries first fought to redefine it at the end of the Qing dynasty. After the 1912 Revolution, when empire gave way to the idea of a nation-state, the Chinese people sought a modern identity, re-designed their governance system and re-wrote their history. *Geming* as revolution became the source of the legitimacy that the new leaders defended in a world based on state sovereignty. They soon found the task of reconciling their republic with the political culture they inherited extraordinarily difficult. They now sense that theirs is neither empire nor nation-state and seek to renew the Chinese state through a civilization of industry and science fused with the best of their heritage.

In the lectures I gave in honour of Yu Ying-shih at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2008, I suggested that this renewal was at the heart of the state rebuilding process that the Chinese struggled with during the past century. Ever since the Qing Empire encountered the modern national empires from the West, its elites have sought to resist domination by seeking a revolutionary path. When that failed, they have also turned to ideas from their heritage to help them maintain their sense of being Chinese. This includes challenging a master narrative of world history that has placed China on its margins.

Reflecting on the ongoing process of globalization, I recall reading Qian Mu's book, *Zhongguo lidai zhengzhi deshi* (Political Successes and Failures of China's Dynasties), when it first appeared in 1952. The book helped me think about Chinese history afresh. I was keenly interested in how the Chinese replaced the Qing dynastic state with the Republic of China and why that bold experiment with nationalism ended rather unexpectedly in 1949 with the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 1952, that surprising event had occurred only three years earlier and was very much on my mind.

Yu Ying-shih was Qian Mu's graduate student at the time and would have read the book. Like his teacher, Yu Ying-shih was an insider who was forced by circumstances to examine the vicissitudes of China's road to modernity from the outside. The two both have written with a feel for China's transformation that is rare today. Having lived through a China undergoing revolution and modernization, both left the mainland determined to go on exploring what had made the Chinese state and civilization exceptional.

My thoughts on the Chinese state, however, are drawn from the point of view of an ethnic Chinese who has looked at the subject largely from the outside. When I called on Qian Mu some 60 years ago, my research project was on Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen and their encounters with British Malaya and with the large numbers of Chinese living and working under colonial administration. The two men saw some of the consequences of Western expansion in Asia. Malaya provided a perspective of the British Empire that looked at world history from the government in London or from the deck of British ships as they sailed the oceans. To their imperial historians, China was a strange distant land on the edge of a maritime global power. In contrast, historians in China were adapting their worldview to reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the dynastic system and preparing China to find its rightful place in the new global narrative.

The essays here represent some of my attempts to understand China's efforts to be a modern state and civilization. They look at

interpretations of history for clues as to how the Chinese deal with issues like building a nation after having been an empire for 2,000 years, and also how they are trying to recover their distinctive cultural heritage through embracing modernity. There have been numerous learned studies within China and outside that deal in one way or another with this subject. The essays collected here do not claim to be comprehensive in capturing the debates that are going on. I am also conscious that writing in English necessarily influences how I describe the processes of change in China. There will be times when the words I use fail to convey what the Chinese thought, and still think, about themselves and the world outside. I recognize that trying to match the concepts indigenous to China with the ones derived from European historiography is itself part of the ongoing process of renewal. Living with that condition is, I believe, something I share with others who seek to understand what drives the Chinese state today.

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