

# Reviving the Spirit of the Xinhai Revolution

Ken'ichi Matsumoto

Speaking to a Chinese diplomat at a symposium on Japan-China relations about six months ago, I remarked on the fact that 2011 was the centennial of the Xinhai Revolution that toppled the Qing dynasty. “Yes, that’s right,” he replied. “But I don’t suppose that has much to do with Japan.”

Astonished, I spoke of the many Japanese who had cooperated and participated in the revolution, in some cases at the cost of their lives. I mentioned Kita Ikki, who traveled to China and ate, slept, and fought alongside Song Jiaoren, founder of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party), as well as such figures as Miyazaki Tōten, Inukai Tsuyoshi, Tōyama Mitsuru, the brothers Yamada Yoshimasa and Junzaburō, and Umeya Shōkichi. Now it was the diplomat’s turn to be astonished. “I had no idea,” he confessed. Pulling out a memo pad, he asked me to write down the Japanese names I had just mentioned.

It is true that the Chinese Communist Party has tended to downplay the importance of the Xinhai Revolution in its version of Chinese history because many of the revolutionaries went on to become leaders of the Kuomintang. Even so, it was a shock to find such a gap in the knowledge of a Chinese Foreign Ministry official. At the same time, I found myself wondering how many of my own compatriots were aware of this chapter in their history, particularly given modern Japan’s longstanding habit of identifying itself with the West instead of Asia.

I would like to use the centennial of the 1911 Revolution as an opportunity to reflect on the historical significance of that event. In doing so, my purpose is not simply to reaffirm Japan’s contribution to the birth of China as a modern state but also to examine the sources of the rising tensions that are currently casting a shadow over the entire region and to seek the key to reversing this trend. For it seems to me that the best way to understand the forces underlying the current conflict and disunity in East Asia is to travel back 100 years and revisit the period that witnessed the Xinhai Revolution and the birth of the

Chinese republic.

### **Yamada Yoshimasa and the Real Pan-Asianism**

The concept of pan-Asianism was first advanced around the end of the nineteenth century as a means of resisting the Western powers' imperialist expansion in the region. Although the verdict on pan-Asianism is mixed, the prevailing tendency has been to define it simply as the ideological rationalization for Japanese aggression in Asia. In fact, this is an excessively narrow, one-sided definition grounded in a historical perspective that views Western civilization as an absolute good.

What sort of thinking actually inspired the aforementioned Japanese activists—pan-Asianists—to support Sun Yat-sen, Father of the Chinese Republic, and devote themselves to the cause of the Chinese revolution?

A good place to begin might be Yamada Yoshimasa, who died in the 1900 Huizhou Uprising, a prelude to the 1911 Revolution. The memorial stele dedicated to Yamada, erected in 1920 at Zenshōan temple in the Yanaka neighborhood of Tokyo, bears an inscription by Sun Yat-sen himself. Yamada was among the most fervent of Japan's pan-Asianists, and a closer look at his life can shed light on this ideology in its earliest and purest form.

Yamada established himself in Tokyo with the help of the political thinker and journalist Kuga Katsunan, who came from the same town. Heeding the advice of Kuga, who preached the importance of business, Yamada enrolled in the Imperial Fisheries Institute, where the Christian evangelist Uchimura Kanzō was teaching, and studied marine products processing. He then took a job at a trading company, which sent him to Shanghai to help sell dried squid to the Chinese.

In China, Yamada was confronted with a country in the process of being picked apart and colonized by the Western powers as the Qing government looked on. Wanting to make a difference somehow, he enrolled at the Institute for Sino-Japanese Commercial Research (Nisshin Bōeki Kenkyūjo).

The Institute for Sino-Japanese Commercial Research was established by Arao Sei, a former Army General Staff officer, in cooperation with the entrepreneur Kishida Ginkō, who had been doing business in China since the closing years of the Edo period (1603-1868). Established for the ostensible purpose of teaching Chinese to the Japanese, teaching Japanese to the Chinese, and promoting trade between Japan and China, the institute also gathered intelligence of all sorts concerning

the people and land of this still largely unknown country. Many of its graduates, Yamada included, went on to serve as army interpreters during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95.

At the institute Yamada resumed his study of the Chinese language, and as time passed, he became increasingly convinced of the need for revolution. Like Kishida, Arao, and all the pan-Asianists at the institute, Yamada believed that Japan could not stand up to the Western powers alone, and that for this reason as well, it was vital that China come to its senses, overthrow the Qing dynasty, and build an independent Chinese state.

In 1899, after Yamada had returned to Tokyo, he received a call from Sun Yat-sen, then living in exile. The two hit it off immediately. The following year, acting on Sun's behest, Yamada was killed in the abortive Huizhou Uprising.

In his epitaph for the memorial stele at Zenshōan temple, Sun extolled Yamada not simply as a Japanese nationalist or a hero in China's nationalist revolution but as "a pioneer of the new Asia." With these words he conveyed Yamada's understanding of the revolution as something more than the ouster of China's Qing rulers, as something bigger than China and Japan together—as a joint struggle aimed ultimately at getting Asia back on its feet. Sun's assessment of Yamada Yoshimasa can be viewed as a distillation of the sentiments embraced by the Japanese pan-Asianists of that time.

### **From Asianism to Ethnocentrism**

This early pan-Asianism had an impact on neighboring countries as well. The Asian Peace and Friendship Society (Ashū Washin Kai) was created in Tokyo in 1907. At its meetings, activists from a number of Asian countries that were either actual or potential victims of Western imperialism—including India and Vietnam as well as China and Japan—gathered in Tokyo and dedicated themselves to Asian independence and solidarity. The Chinese were initially reluctant to allow the Koreans to participate, regarding Korea as a tributary state, but in the end they agreed that unity in the face of the Western imperialist threat should take precedence.

At that time the Chinese and Japanese shared the goal of building a strong, independent Asia. But this early pan-Asianism was replaced by something very different in both Japan and China, and the change engendered any number of internal and external conflicts. Let us begin by looking at China.

As early as the days of the Xinhai Revolution, the goal of ousting the Manchu Qing dynasty had fostered a somewhat ethnocentric perspective—embodied in the slogan “down with the Manchu, up with the Han”—among the Chinese revolutionaries, including Sun Yat-sen himself. As a result, the government of the Republic of China that emerged in 1912, ending 2,000 years of imperial rule, was inherently biased toward the Han ethnic group (the Chinese majority). This underlying tendency has not only persisted to the present day but has grown more pronounced over time.

For one brief moment, it seemed as if this Han ethnocentrism were on its way out. Around the time that the People’s Republic of China was founded, in 1949, Mao Zedong was advocating the principle of self-determination put forth by US President Woodrow Wilson after World War I. At that time Mao indicated a willingness to recognize self-rule by the Tibetans, Uighurs, Mongols, and other ethnic minorities within a federal Chinese republic. By 1957, however, it became clear that the policy had changed. Zhou Enlai’s emphasis on “regional autonomy” for ethnic minorities around this time amounted to a declaration that Beijing was unwilling to permit self-rule. In his book *Bohyō naki sōgen* (2009; Plain of Unmarked Graves), Yang Haiying describes how this change in policy ended in the wholesale slaughter of activists accused of belonging to the Inner Mongolia People’s Revolutionary Party, allegedly formed to promote Mongolian separatism.

Today there can be no doubt that the Communist government of China is reaping the whirlwind from the ethnocentrism that first raised its head in the early twentieth century with the birth of the Republic of China. This was vividly demonstrated by the furor that erupted when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Liu Xiaobo. Liu played a leading role in Charter 08, a manifesto calling for democratic reforms, published on the Internet in December 2008. He is now in prison, having been tried and convicted of “inciting subversion of state power.” The Chinese government lashed out against the Nobel committee and put Liu’s wife under house arrest in the wake of the decision to award the dissident the Peace Prize, behavior that earned Beijing a harsh condemnation from the international community.

There is an explanation for the Chinese government’s hypersensitivity on this issue. Charter 08 called not only for Western-style democratic reforms but also for the establishment of a federal Chinese republic. The last thing Beijing will countenance is a revival of the concept of ethnic self-determination and self-rule ultimately rejected by Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, for the simple reason that it is incompat-

ible with the Chinese Communist Party's basic policy of instituting incremental democratic reforms while preserving one-party rule. The reason the Communist government has clung to its hard-line stance in the face of international criticism is that it views minority separatist movements as a serious threat to its existence. Later we will return to this and other social issues facing China today.

### **From 21 Demands, 100 Years of Resentment**

How did the situation change in Japan? As explained previously, the Japanese pan-Asianists who devoted themselves to the Chinese revolution were motivated in large part by a conviction that Japan could not resist the Western powers on its own. But after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, Japan fell prey to the illusion that it had achieved parity with the Western powers, and its policies toward the rest of East Asia took on an increasingly imperialist character.

In 1915, this undercurrent came to a head in the Twenty-One Demands that Japanese submitted to the fledgling government of China after seizing Qingdao in Shandong Province in the midst of World War I. This list of demands, which claimed major concessions on the Shandong Peninsula, in essence announced the beginning of an era of Japanese expansionist aggression in Asia. Yet the Chinese government, led by Yuan Shikai, showed itself all too willing to accept these demands. This triggered a massive and understandable backlash by the Chinese people, and the revolutionaries under Sun Yat-sen demanded that the agreement be revoked.

At this time Ōkuma Shigenobu was prime minister of Japan. Ōkuma was a typical populist politician who had won the public's enthusiastic support by trumpeting a hard-line foreign policy stance. When he died in 1922, somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 mourners flooded into Hibiya Park, where his funeral was being held. In contrast, the funeral of Meiji Restoration patriot Yamagata Aritomo the same year attracted only 3,000-4,000 mourners. The Twenty-One Demands were put forth by the Ōkuma cabinet, whose power rested on the popular appeal of this kind of demagoguery.

At this stage the imperialist policies of the Japanese government also drew some domestic fire from the pan-Asianist camp. Kita Ikki criticized the government's approach and wrote that the Twenty-One Demands marked the beginning of a "deeply deplorable" period for Japan. Nakano Seigō was critical as well. Ishibashi Tanzan, who espoused the British policy of freedom of the seas, argued that Japan

had “no need of overseas—territory and concessions” and called for a “Shō Nippon [small Japan] focused on trade rather than a Dai Nippon [Great Japan].”

But these scattered anti-imperialism voices were drowned out. Making the most of its status as one of the victor nations in World War I, Japan turned ever more decisively toward expansionism.

In 1924, en route to Beijing for a summit of the First United Front between the Kuomintang and the CCP, Sun Yat-sen stopped in Kobe, where he gave a lecture on the topic of pan-Asianism. In his speech he implied that the Twenty-One Demands were no different from the unequal treaties imposed by the West, and that for China to accept them would have been tantamount to accepting Japanese imperial rule. Then he issued this challenge: “The question remains whether Japan will be a watchdog for the Western Way [rule] of Might or a defender of the Eastern Way [rule] of Right.”

With this observation Sun Yat-sen truly hit the mark. Unfortunately, from this time on, virtually no one in Japan took his challenge to heart or questioned the way Japan had chosen. In the prevailing climate, even the pan-Asianists who had supported and aided the Revolution of 1911 had become utterly convinced that imperialism was the way forward for Japan.

In fact, the only pan-Asianist who gave Sun Yat-sen’s speech the credit it deserved was Nakano Seigō. In an essay titled “Sun Bun kun no kyorai to Ajia undō” (Sun Wen and the Pan-Asian Movement), he sharply criticized Inukai Tsuyoshi, Tōyama Mitsuru, and other pan-Asianist forerunners, declaring, “The pan-Asianism of today’s Japan merely answers white imperialism with an imperialism of our own.”

Incidentally, for many years Nakano went unacknowledged as the author of this essay, which he wrote under a pen name. Postwar Japanese scholars considered Nakano too much of a fascist to write such a piece, and their prejudices prevented them from recognizing the truth. For indeed, in his belief that Japan needed to be strong to resist aggression by the Western powers, Nakano was to emerge as one of the most zealous proponents of Japanese militarism and the Pacific War.

Be that as it may, the presentation of the Twenty-One Demands can be considered a historical milepost in the transformation of Japanese pan-Asianism from a belief in Asian solidarity to an imperialist justification for Japanese hegemony. And as such, it may be considered the ultimate source of the anti-Japanese nationalism that has persisted in China to the present day. Outrage over the “national humiliation” to which the demands subjected China led to anti-Japanese

demonstrations and escalated into the anti-Japanese May 4 Movement, in which the young Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai both rose to prominence.

Another result of the Twenty-One Demands was to strengthen ties between the United States and China as Washington successfully pressured the Japanese government to relinquish its demands for the stationing of Japanese military and police forces in China. This ultimately sandwiched Japan between two hostile forces.

Japan had to commit more than one blunder in order to start a reckless war with the United States and breed an anti-Japanese nationalism that persists in China to this day. But the Twenty-One Demands, which single-handedly destroyed the cooperative spirit nurtured in the Xinhai Revolution, must surely go at the top of the list.

### **The Lost Century**

The point of “traveling back 100 years” to understand current problems between Japan and China is to examine how things have changed in the interim. My conclusion, in fact, is that the geopolitical power games in East Asia today are little different from those of 100 years ago, even though the major players (other than Japan) have changed. History, in other words, is repeating itself.

In 1917, just before the end of World War I, the Russian Revolution broke out and the Soviet Union was born. From then until the last decades of the twentieth century, the conflict between communism and its opponents gradually came to dominate international affairs. This was particularly true in the decades following World War II, when the Cold War created a deep and enduring chasm between the Eastern and Western blocs. Throughout that time, a single overriding issue—whether characterized as the ideological conflict between capitalism and communism or the political rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union—drove almost all international behavior.

When the collapse of the Berlin Wall ushered in a new era—and a “third opening” for Japan—this issue ceased to exist. And no sooner had it vanished than the old, pre-Russian Revolution issues reemerged—namely, nationalistic rivalries centered on religion, ethnicity, territory, and economic interest. Although the dominant Cold War structure had overridden and obscured these older rivalries, they had continued to simmer under the surface—on hold, as it were—for close to a century.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, economic development

and rising nationalism among the Western powers set off a frenzied race to secure new sources of wealth, a race that played out in a series of alliances and bloody wars. By the end of that century, East Asia was the last major region in the world that remained up for grabs. Ignoring Great Britain's call for peace in the Far East—motivated by a desire to maintain its own supremacy—the other powers rushed in to claim their share: Russia, France, Germany, and (belatedly) the United States, followed by an upstart Asian power, Japan.

Japan's dramatic rise to power posed a threat to the countries of the West. Hoping to nip that threat in the bud, France, Germany, and Russia engineered the so-called Tripartite Intervention, pressuring Japan into renouncing the Liaodong Peninsula, which it had won from China in the First Sino-Japanese War under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. When Russia took possession of the concessions that Japan had returned to Qing dynasty China (under the Li-Lobanov Treaty), embittered Japanese nationalists began to nurture the dream of one day waging war on Russia—a grim resolve expressed in the phrase *gashin shōtan*, or “sleeping on firewood and eating bite.”

What is the situation in East Asia today, a century later? The Western powers no longer threaten the sovereignty of the Asian nations. But disputes over territory, economic interest, natural resources, and sea lanes have erupted anew. Today the players are China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and Russia. Where previously Great Britain, in an alliance with Japan, monitored the region anxiously in an effort to preserve “peace in the Far East,” the United States now plays much the same role. The basic geopolitical situation, in which powers lock horns in an effort to maximize their own national interests, is the same as it was a century ago.

Today, as the emerging economies of East Asia take up where the Western powers and Japan left off, the most active and energetic player is clearly China. After the death of Yuan Shikai, China was parceled up among the warlords, wracked by civil war, and invaded by Japan. But it overcame all that, and today, with its economy booming, it is leveraging its new economic clout to maximize its influence and prestige in the global community. Through the successful 2008 Beijing Olympics, it managed to project a sense of unity, national solidarity, and racial harmony to the world.

But the reality inside China is somewhat different. That fragile fabric of national unity is under strain from growing ethnic conflicts and the widening gap between rich and poor. The decision to forcibly unite China as a centralized nation-state instead of a federal republic

has involved painful and coercive policies, such as the compulsory use of Mandarin Chinese among peoples who historically speak a different language, and such ordeals have only heightened the ethnic consciousness of these minorities. Escalating demands for independence are the inevitable result.

The conventional wisdom is that popular pressure for political freedom and human rights mounts as soon as a nation's average per capita income passes \$10,000. Such was the case in Japan in the 1960s and South Korea and Taiwan in the mid-1980s. In places like Shanghai and Guangdong, average income has reached about \$9,000. Mencius said that "The people are the most important element in a state; next comes the gods of land and grain; least of all the ruler himself. Therefore, to win the common people is the way to become emperor." Before long, the Chinese Communist Party, in attempting to negotiate the transition to a nation-state, will surely find itself reflecting on the truth of these words. When that time comes, will it be capable of answering the call for democratic reforms and steering a course toward a federal Chinese republic in which minorities have the right of self-determination? If not, will it ever be able to transcend the "Down with the Manchu, up with the Han" Sino-centrism that has persisted for the past century?

### **The Voice of Experience**

For now, in any case, Beijing has clearly chosen to suppress internal differences while striving toward regional hegemony—a choice closely mirroring that of Japan as it turned toward imperialism early in the twentieth century. The result is that much of the world views China with distrust and alarm. If Beijing believes that China can challenge the West's claim on modern civilization by amassing as much power as possible and throwing its weight around, instead of by offering alternative values, it is deluding itself.

In an earlier time, rampant ethnocentrism led Japan to commit wrongs of historic proportions. After annexing Korea in 1910, Japan forced the Koreans to adopt the Japanese language and culture. It built an absolutist system in which everything was subordinated to the emperor, and naturally it demanded monolithic, unified loyalty from all its citizens. The absolutism of Japan's emperor cult and the rise of Japanese imperialism were two sides of the same coin.

Just as Japan sought East Asian hegemony through its imperialist policies, China seems to be seeking the same goal, mainly through the

buildup of military power. No one knows better than the Japanese what lies at the end of this road. This is precisely why Japan has the ability—and the duty—to point out the perils of China's present course.

However, we Japanese can only issue such a warning after we have confronted the reasons for our own failure and extrapolated general lessons from that experience. Until we have done that, we can scarcely expect others to heed our advice.

One is reminded again of the choice Sun Yat-sen put to the Japanese people 100 years ago, between the Way of Might and the Way of Right. How did the Japanese people answer this question? We can scarcely single out the pan-Asianists for turning their back on the Eastern Way of Right. In 1938, Nishida Kitarō, whom I consider Japan's only true philosopher, dodged the question this way; "Some speak of a choice between the Way of Right [*ōdō*] and the Way of Might [*hadō*], but for Japan there is only the Imperial Way [*kōdō*]." In other words, in Japan all must yield to the absolute supremacy of the Japanese emperor, descended in one long unbroken line from the gods.

The Japanese have yet to really confront and surmount the issues raised by the emperor system. In 1970, the novelist Mishima Yukio committed ritual suicide with the cry "Tennō Heika banzai!" (Long live his majesty the Emperor!). Loyalty to the emperor was inseparable from Mishima's vision of a beautiful, spiritual Japan. The historical novelist Shiba Ryōtarō objected to this view of Japan, arguing that the essence of the Japanese nation was the spirit of the artisan and the non-ideological, industrious character of its people. In this debate, two sharply contrasting concepts of Japan collided in a manner that should have been impossible to ignore. And yet we ignored the collision.

It is obvious to anyone reading Sun Yat-sen's speech that the correct choice is the Eastern Way of Right. But where does it exist today? This question is not addressed only to China. The countries of Southeast Asia are also building up their economic strength at a prodigious pace. Will their new-found power lead to a rising tide of nationalism accompanied by hegemonistic, imperialistic tendencies? Once again, if any nation can warn them against such a course, it is Japan, which erred so badly.

The way to prosperity in East Asia is not ethnocentrism but a quest for solidarity and a search for shared identity, much like that undertaken a century ago by the Asian Peace and Friendship Society.

The centennial of the Xinhai Revolution offers a rare opportunity for China and Japan to affirm a shared commitment to Asian values. To begin with, the Japanese government should send representatives to

attend China's ceremonies commemorating the Xinhai Revolution at the tomb of Sun Yat-sen. In this way, perhaps both sides can relive that moment in history when a partnership between Japan and China was possible.

\* *Translated from "Sonbun no haka de Ajia to nashonarizumu o furikaerō," Chūō Kōron, February 2011, pp. 150-157. (Courtesy of Chūō Kōron Shinsha) [February 2011]*