Revolution of 1911 in China

**Abstract:** The Revolution of 1911 took place in the context of penetration the imperialist powers into China. Foreign penetration resulted in a deep socio-economic crisis and the surrender of the Manchu ruling government to the foreign powers. It was the outcome of a series of movements of different types against foreign control and Manchu exploitation. It was divided into three stages: a) 1894-1904; b) 1905-1908; and c) 1909-1911. The social basis of the movement consisted of students, teachers, secret societies, government officials, national bourgeoisie, overseas Chinese military students in Japan, clerks and armed peasants. This
revolution was regarded as a bourgeois democratic revolution. It was led by Sun Yat-sen. Revolutionary organizations such as Tung Meng Hui, Kuang Fu Hui and Hua hsing Hui played important roles. Since the Chinese national bourgeoisie was economically weak and politically flabby and had both contradictions with imperialism and feudalism as also proneness to compromise with its enemies, this revolution succeeded only to a certain degree and proved to be failure in the end.)

**Background**
The Revolution of 1911 in China, which signalled the end of Manchu rule and its replacement by a Republic, has been acclaimed as a bourgeois-democratic revolution directed against imperialism and feudalism. It was the outcome of a series of movements against imperialist penetration and Manchu exploitation. This revolution was led by Sun Yat-sen, the representative of the national bourgeoisie of China. Since the Chinese national bourgeoisie was economically weak and politically flabby and had both contradictions with imperialism and feudalism as also proneness to compromise with its enemy, this revolution succeeded only to a certain degree and proved to be a failure in the end.
China’s defeat at the ends of Britain and other European powers and the signing of a series of unequal treaties transformed China from a feudal country into a feudal and semi-colonial one. In collaboration with the Chinese landlords, compradors, militarists and others, the foreign powers started slicing up the Chinese ‘watermelon’ into their respective spheres of influence and exercised control over the economy, politics and society of the country. They forced China to open 82 of her coastal and inland ports to their trade and marked off areas in sixteen cities as “concessions”. Their investments in China mounted to 200 million silver dollars, more than ten times those by Chinese national capitalists. They gained control over 80% to 90% of China’s heavy industry, communications and transport and commodity markets. And through unequal treaties, loans and indemnities they also seized control of China’s customs and inland taxes. Their warships penetrated into China’s territorial seas, inland waterways and lakes. By their teachings, the foreign missionaries had denationalized hundreds of thousands of Chinese converts and thus disintegrated not only the body but also the spirit of the nation. Even after the invasion of China by eight foreign powers in 1900, empress dowager Tzu hsi’s public proclamation of winning “the good graces of the powers
commensurately with China’s resources” indicated the extent to which the Manchu court would be subservient to the imperialist powers. All these exacerbated the social contradictions within China and led to a series of movements and peasant rebellions that put an end to Manchu rule and then set up the republic.

This revolution of 1911 can be divided into three stages: 1) 1894-1904; 2) 1905-1908; 3) 1909-1911. Throughout these three stages, different social forces played their role in it—the new gentry, Western-educated intellectuals, reformists, the later-Ching reforms, Constitutionalists, secret societies, toiling people, overseas Chinese students and, over and above all, the revolutionaries who assembled under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen.

**First Stage (1894-1904)**

From the 1890s, reformist ideology had been gaining ground among the Western-educated professional and commercial people who resided in China’s partially Westernized port cities. The national sentiment of the Chinese people was hurt at the aggressive war waged by the French imperialists during 1884-85 and the humiliating treaty that China was compelled
to sign. Sun Yat-sen, along with others, presented conventional proposals for reform to the powerful officials of the day, but failed to impress those who were in power. This failure impelled him to think in terms of the revolutionary overthrow of the Manchu rulers and the setting up of a republic.

With this end in view, Sun Yat-sen formed the **Revive China Society** or **Hsing Chung Hui** in 1894 in Honolulu. Anti-Manchu popular outbreaks spread from one area to another. Sun Yat-sen first planned a revolutionary uprising in Canton. The Chien Heng Company in Hongkong—ostensibly a commercial firm—acted as a legal cover of the Hongkong Hsing Chung Hui. In fact, as the Chinese scholars hold, it served as the headquarters for the Canton uprising. Sun had, by then, been secretly carrying on revolutionary work among government officials, students and teachers, the Ching army, the secret societies and “Greenwood” groups of armed rebel peasants near the city of Canton. These formed the social basis of Sun’s Hsing Chung Hui. H.Z.Schiffrin has narrated an account of how the rising in Canton was to take place. However, the plot was exposed and Sun became a fugitive in China.
China’s defeat in the war with Japan of 1894-95 proved the futility of programme of “Westerization” and “learning from foreigners”. Then the failure of the Reform Movement of 1898 made many people come to the conclusion that such movements would in no way bring about any permanent solution to the ills China had been suffering from. Meanwhile the situation in Japan turned out to be favorable for the Chinese revolutionaries from July 1899 when all foreigners residing in Japan had lost the privilege of extra-territoriality which they had previously enjoyed. While this placed the Manchu rulers at a disadvantageous position, it benefited the anti-Manchu forces. They could now make anti-Manchu propaganda openly and organize the overseas Chinese residing in Japan.

Meanwhile, events in China were moving towards a national crisis. Foreign aggressiveness was receiving no check. Railway and mining concessions were being lavishly given away. In 1896, Russia had obtained concessions in Manchuria for the trans-Siberian railway. The Germans, the French and the Belgians had railways projects in their pockets. These rapid developments of foreign enterprise disturbed Chinese life. The condition was ripe for a revolutionary uprising. The
torch was applied by the Boxers whose watchword was “Exterminate the foreigners”. The final stringency of the settlement of 1895, which exacted an enormous indemnity, formed a punishment from which China had been suffering ever since. It must have seemed to the conscientious people that China had already reached the nadir of humiliation.

Besides Hsing Chung-hui, there were other societies which played positive roles in the revolution. Some of those were Kuang Fu Hui (Society for the Restoration of China) and Hua hsing Hui (Society for the Revival of the Chinese Nation). These three revolutionary organizations were in agreement in the common objective of opposing the Ching government and overthrowing it by armed revolt. The regions embracing Kwangtung, Hunan, Hupei and the lower Yangtze Valley region were the main centres of the movement. More advanced in industry and commerce, they became centres of bourgeois democratic revolution. Moreover, secret societies, whose central slogan was “overthrow the Ching and restore the Ming”, extended their active support to such revolutionary efforts.
Besides, there was also the appearance of a number of periodicals in which articles advocating different aspects of the democratic bourgeois revolution were published and gained a wide audience. Revolutionary ideology was thus disseminated through publications of different types. These could be divided into three parts:

1) Reprinting books exposing the torture committed by the Ching nobility ever since they seized power by overthrowing the Ming in 1644.

2) Publication of essays and books written by bourgeois revolutionary intellectuals to expose the corruption of the Manchus and their subservience and selling out the country to the imperialist powers.

3) Compilation and translation of books written in the capitalist West during their stages of the bourgeois revolution to help introduce bourgeois democratic revolutionary ideas.

The intellectuals who could make the deepest impression on the public mind through their writings were Chen Tien-hua, Tsou Jung and Chang Tai-yen. Chen Tien-hua, in his *Alarm Bell* and *Awakening*, hailed the greatness of the Chinese nation and assailed the villainous role of the Ching ruling
clique. His demands included the expulsion of the foreign invaders, and the destruction of the native traitors and collaborators who served them, to attain the revolutionary aims of “revision of treaties, recovery of lost sovereign rights and achievement of complete independence”.

Another crusader named Tsou Jung in his *The Revolutionary Army* expressed his opinion in the same simple and bold way. His ideas comprised of the overthrow of the Manchu state, struggle against foreign aggression, equality for the people and the establishment of a republican form of government.

Like all repressive regimes, the Manchu government also resorted to state terror and repression after being faced with such political and ideological attacks. When the *Kiangsi News* was banned, the revolutionaries came out with another revolutionary paper named *Citizens’ Daily*. As more and more papers faced the wrath of the Manchu police, people became more and more interested to know what was being written in those proscribed literature. Tsao Ah-kuo, a peasant in Chekiang province was so much filled with the spirit of revolt that he managed to get a copy of *Awakening*, read it and began making speeches everywhere he went about the
revolution. Not surprisingly, the Ching government arrested and executed him. The rulers wanted to drive home the lesson that those who would dare to read and propagate such books would be put to death. The people of China, however, refused to be cowed down. More people sought the book, and when it was not available in the countryside, they procured them from Shanghai. “Where there is oppression, there is resistance”. When Mao made this statement in the later days, he had already summed up the past and the present history of China.

Repression was not the only path adopted by the Manchu rulers to keep their rule in tact. In fact, in the years after 1900, the already awakened intellectual movement showed a vigour that could not be denied. Reforms that were quashed in 1898 demanded reconsideration. Empress dowager Tzu-hsi did not have any option other than carrying out Later-Ching Reforms (1901-08) protect her regime from the impending doom.