

Yüan Shih-k'ai

Chinese army leader and reformist minister in the twilight of the Manchu (Ch'ing) dynasty (until 1911) and then first president of the Republic of China (1912–16).

Yüan was from a landed military family of Hsiang-ch'eng in Honan province. In his youth he showed a propensity for pleasure-seeking and excelled in physical activity rather than scholarship, although he was obviously a man of remarkable astuteness. He failed to win even the lowest of the classical degrees but was to have the distinction of being the first Han Chinese to hold a viceroyalty and to become a grand councillor without any academic qualification. In the last days of the empire, he was made a marquess.

Yüan began his career in the Ch'ing brigade of the Anhwei army, commanded by Li Hung-chang, which was dispatched to Korea in 1882 to try to prevent Japanese encroachment in the area. The political crises of that remote kingdom repeatedly offered him opportunities to prove the correctness of his judgment and the promptness of his action, especially in military and economic affairs. In 1885 he was made Chinese commissioner at Seoul, and his energetic and loyal service to the throne contributed to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95.

With the destruction of China's navy and army by Japan in the war, Peking was exposed to external and internal attack; in consequence, the training of a new army became an urgent task that fell on Yüan. As the division under his command was the only remnant of China's army that survived the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, Yüan's political stature became greater than that of all others, and in 1901 he was given the viceroyalty of the metropolitan province. In that office, and later as a grand councillor, he was to play a decisive part in China's modernization and defense programs; throughout, he enjoyed the trust and unflinching support of the dowager empress, Tz'u-hsi. On the death of the empress (1908), his opponents, notably the regent for the infant emperor, stripped him of all his offices and sent him home. Nevertheless, when the tide of revolution threatened to engulf the Manchu dynasty, the throne was to need his service once more.

At this critical juncture, Yüan appeared to conservatives and revolutionaries alike as the only man who could lead the country to peace and unity; and so both the emperor in Peking and the provisional president in Nanking recommended Yüan to be the first president of China. The treasury then was empty; the provinces were in the hands of local war lords; a permanent constitution was still in the making; and the newly elected National Assembly was, to Yüan, too quarrelsome and too cumbersome for the good of the country. When his plan for a gigantic foreign loan was obstructed by the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) in the National Assembly, he ruthlessly murdered the chairman of the party and undermined the assembly, thus bringing about the revolt against him in 1913. His victory in that struggle marked the end of all hopes for parliamentary democracy in China. Thereafter, he contrived to make himself president for life and then boldly tried to create a new imperial dynasty in 1915–16. Though his aim was to unite the country and to strengthen its central leadership, Yüan's last attempt, ironically, sowed dissension even among the conservative civilian and military forces that had supported him.

Widespread opposition, backed by Japan, rose to challenge his authority. Yüan found his European friends preoccupied by World War I and his old lieutenants unwilling to fight.

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