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# Anniversaries: The Rise and Fall of Wang Mang

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We subscribe to an online encyclopedia to help one of my sons with homework, and because I placed the order, their “This Day in History” feature comes to my inbox. China rarely figures, which isn’t that surprising. After all, they need brief, punchy items that will catch readers’ attention, and that means items familiar enough to a general audience that a five word title is understandable, and that only three sentences are needed to remind us of what happened and why we should care. So I’m not crusading for “1644: Manchus enter Beijing with the help of Wu Sangui” to replace D-Day as the entry for June 6.

Still, anniversaries are good hooks for thinking about how history matters, and Chinese history has plenty of them. From that perspective, starting a blog in 2008 is less than ideal, because so many of the familiar modern anniversaries end in “9,” not “8”: the May 4th movement (1919), the founding of the P.R.C. (1949), Tiananmen (1989). Over the course of this year, I’ll be ruminating on a bunch of the “8” anniversaries, including some that may seem pretty obscure. The obvious ones are recent –The Great Leap Forward begins in 1958, Deng Xiaoping solidifies his power and launches his reforms in 1978, Disney releases Mulan in 1998 (OK, they may not all be world-historical events) – but I like the challenge of starting way back, especially since it’s not the period I research. So to begin with...

## **8 C.E. (2,000 years ago): Wang Mang usurps the throne, bans slavery, and institutes radical land reform – but still falls to peasant rebels.**

The background to this is some horribly complicated court politics, but Wang Mang (45 BCE-23CE) was an official from a very elite family that had inter-married with the imperial lineage; the emperor Chengdi, who came to the throne in 32 BCE, was his first cousin. Chengdi was not much interested in governing and a succession of regents did so in his stead; Wang Mang was appointed regent in 8 BCE. The emperor then died without an heir two years later. Wang was up and down during political struggles over the next 15 years, but by 6 CE he had installed his daughter as empress, a one-year old as emperor and himself as regent and “acting emperor.” Two years later, after an intensive propaganda campaign that included the appearance of many engineered “portents,” considerable pressure mounted for him to assume the throne; after demurring a few times over the course of 8 C.E. (increasing his reputation for Confucian virtue) he finally accepted. He proclaimed that the Han had lost the mandate of heaven, and proclaimed himself first emperor of the Xin 新 (“New”) Dynasty on January 10, 9 C.E. (OK, it didn’t all happen in the year 8.)

Essentially all our knowledge of Wang Mang comes from one very hostile source — the historian Ban Gu (32-92 CE), who also served as an official under the restored Han regime that followed Wang Mang’s fall. Even so, the record indicates that Wang Mang was genuinely popular during his rise to power, in part because he was not personally corrupt and seemed content with (by the standards of the elite of the time) relatively modest amounts of wealth and honor. Ban Gu tells us that in 4.C.E, almost half a million people – in an empire with 60 million far flung and mostly illiterate people – petitioned the throne to grant him high honors, which he refused.

Wang Mang took the throne in very troubled times, marked particularly by the increasing concentration of land-ownership, and an increase in the number of landless people who were enslaved. Seeking solutions, he was inspired by what were called the Old Texts – writings in an ancient script that had been found about 150 years before, during renovations at Confucius’s ancestral home. If genuine – as Wang Mang believed them to be — these texts were significantly older than the other Confucian classics; among other things, they described the institutions of an era of perfect government under the ancient Duke of Zhou, Confucius’ hero. Taking those institutions as a goal to strive towards (while acknowledging that perfect recovery was unlikely), Wang Mang tried to “reinstate” a system where public land would be distributed to families in equal and inalienable

squares; he also banned slavery (except for people condemned to be slaves of the state as a punishment for crimes). Both of these measures were widely flouted by elites and had to be repealed within a few years, but probably benefited a fair number of commoners, anyway. A series of currency reforms – designed to raise government revenue, but also to restore the precise coin shapes allegedly used in the early Zhou period – ended in failure and angered elites; however, it is not clear how much it mattered to most of the people in what was not a very monetized economy. Meanwhile, lest the land and slavery measures make him seem a committed “progressive” — in fact, the twentieth century scholar and diplomat Hu Shi (1891-1962) called him China’s “first socialist” — he also made a large number of government offices that had previously been appointed by merit hereditary, because he believed that that, too, conformed to the early Zhou golden age described in the Old Texts.

Last but by no means least, Wang Mang insisted on returning as much as possible to the official titles of the Zhou era; this involved revoking quite a few honorary designations, including one that had been made the ruler of the Xiongnu tribal confederation (sometimes referred to as “Huns”) across the Northern border the symbolic equal of the Emperor. This and other failures of diplomacy led to war with the Xiongnu — and though Chinese forces more or less held the line, the financial strain of these wars was enormous.

As if all this wasn’t enough, Wang Mang had the bad luck to preside over atrocious weather, including punishing droughts in some places (including the capital area) and massive rains that led to huge breaks in the Yellow River dikes. It seems, in fact, that this is what undid him — peasant rebellions broke out in precisely the places that flood refugees had moved to en masse. It was these peasant insurgents who toppled the regime and killed Wang Mang in 23 CE, though what was left of the Han imperial lineage (which, for obvious reasons, had never stopped opposing Wang Mang’s new dynasty) took advantage of the situation to place itself back in power, ruling almost 200 years more.

OK, who cares? Well, for one thing, we can see a number of the recurring patterns of Chinese history at work here. First, there’s the state-peasant-elite triangle, in which the central government, again and again over the centuries, tried to create and sustain an independent, small-holding peasantry that it could tax and/or conscript directly, without having to work through local magnates. This long-running dynamic stands in sharp contrast to any number of states that took it for granted until a much later date that they should work indirectly through elites, and would not have seen it as a problem that the more and more peasants were becoming tenants, slaves, or other kinds of dependents of the aristocracy. At the same time, we see the other side of that dynamic — that when the state could tax and draft peasants directly, they often pushed hard enough to drive the weaker ones into debt, and thus back into dependence on local elites. (One of Wang Mang’s more imaginative programs was for a state monopoly on lending, designed to prevent this — but that never really got off the ground.)

The rise and fall of Wang Mang also shows some interesting patterns in Chinese foreign policy, which one can see some signs of even today. The enormous importance of symbolism in foreign relations is hardly unique to East Asia, but it certainly stands out in this story, apparently triggering the Xiongnu revolt. Well before that, a number of the “portents” Wang Mang manufactured to show he was destined to rule involved foreigners (at his instigation) bringing exotic gifts which showed they recognized his virtue: a rhinoceros from what is now southern Vietnam, and a white pheasant from an independent kingdom in what is today Southwest China. What is striking here is that, unlike the Xiongnu, neither of these kingdoms was a military threat or any other kind of direct factor in Chinese affairs. It is not immediately obvious why the recognition of weak and distant parties should be particularly important in legitimizing the ruler of a great power, but it clearly was — and is, as anyone can attest who has watched Chinese newscasts and noted the prominence given to even strategically trivial foreign delegations. Introductory surveys of Chinese history often make much of how the “tribute system” of foreign relations — then its formative stages — enacted a Chinese sense of superiority to everyone else; but part of what that leaves out is that such a system also made it a necessity for ruling China that foreigners (and minorities within the empire, who also often offered “tribute”) recognized that China embodied that superiority, or at least were willing to act as if they did. (It leaves out a lot of other things, too, which will come up when we hit other dates.)

Also, the story of these years reminds us that there were always pragmatic exceptions to the idea

that the Chinese emperor was a ruler without equal, responsible for “All Under Heaven.” Not only did many tributaries receive gifts that far exceeded the value of their tribute, so that economics quietly told a different story than ritual did about the balance of power, but ritual itself was flexible. One of the Xiongnu leaders had a seal that placed him on an equal rank to the Han Emperor and this was apparently no big deal (in other words, not a sign that the Chinese state was failing), until Wang Mang, in a burst of Confucian fundamentalism, took it away from him.

Finally, Wang Mang is interesting for the enormous investment so many people have had in interpreting and evaluating him: the Columbia political scientist C. Martin Wilbur once called him “the most controversial figure in Chinese history.” (Mao was still alive at the time, so maybe he didn’t yet count as “in history.”) His biography in the canonical History of the Han Dynasty treats him as a boundlessly ambitious master villain – it acknowledges that he was popular for quite some time, but attributes this entirely to patronage he dispensed, and to virtuous gestures that were completely hypocritical. This remained the majority view throughout the imperial period. On the other hand, Hu Shi was not alone, though he was unusually fulsome — in seeing him as a visionary reformer who failed only because he was far ahead of his time, and one of the greatest statesmen in Chinese history. (And this is not a case of a modern radical looking for a forebear to praise – Hu Shi himself was firmly convinced that twentieth century China needed gradual, not radical, change, and threw in his lot, despite a number of qualms, with the Nationalists against the Communists.)

But what none of these commentators called him is what recent Western historians have insisted on calling him: a committed Confucian. For centuries it has been his departures from traditional policies – whether damned as cynical and dangerous or praised as humane and innovative – that have been salient. By contrast recent scholarship, both pro and con, emphasizes how he justified almost everything he did in terms of classical texts, insisted on trying to return to the world that those texts described, and made far fewer compromises with the institutions that had evolved since Confucius’ time than the rest of his contemporaries. (Despite Wang Mang’s fall, the Old Texts he championed became canonical thereafter, and remained central parts of Chinese intellectual life – if not literal blueprints for policy-making, until Qing scholars proved that they were hundreds of years newer than they claimed to be. By persuading generations of scholars that they had greater access to the classical age than they could otherwise have claimed, this shift had an enormous influence – but one I wouldn’t dare try to specify.) That Wang Mang insisted on citing the Old Texts as a guide to things ranging from the shapes of coins to the distribution of land to the proper titles to be conferred on foreign and domestic dignitaries leaps out at us in a way that it did not in the past, even for a Chinese scholar as committed to questioning “tradition” as Hu Shi. The difference undoubtedly says something about how much even iconoclastic scholars who began their careers within a Confucian world took for granted some degree of reliance on ancient models of government, even on the part of a radical who usurped the throne; but it also probably says something about how familiar we are with fundamentalist “solutions” to the problem of finding guidance for changing times.

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