

In late Qing and Republican China controversy arose over the name of the year and calendrical basis of the date. For more than two millennia, years were calculated eponymously in accordance with the emperor's reign, but in the late Qing reformers and revolutionaries began proposing alternatives. The Republicans adopted the solar calendar, resulting in a series of clashes with the lunar calendar-loving public. The ensuing battle over the calendar became entangled with a host of issues concerning national identity, cultural traditions and the meaning of modernity.

Modern times:

the meaning of dates and calendars in Modern China, 1895-1935

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Chinese lunar New Year has become a global holiday, but in the late 1920s the Chinese Nationalist Party banned this celebration along with the lunar calendar upon which it is based. For more than two millennia, Chinese calculated time, celebrated festivals, observed religious rites, shaped business practices, and scheduled important events in accordance with the revolutions of the moon. Coupled with the lunar calendar was the imperial system of eponymous dating using the first year of an Emperor's reign as year one. In the late 19th century reformers and revolutionaries attacked eponymous dating as indicative of the Manchu Qing's failure to modernise. In the 20th century, the Nationalists' ban of the lunar calendar produced clashes with the public over issues of national identity, cultural traditions, and the meaning of modernity.

The Anti-Manchu Years, 1896-1911

Following China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), government reformers began to search for solutions to China's continued weakness. The scholar and political reformist, Kang Youwei, taking a page from Max Weber, argued that as Western economic growth was based on Christianity the Chinese should institutionalise Confucianism as their state religion. One manifestation of this goal was Kang's proposal to rename the year from Guangxu 24 (1898) to Confucius 2475. Kang did not intend to undermine the emperor, but to create a religious orthodoxy fostering political reform and economic growth. Liang Qichao, Kang's most famous student, was more ambivalent. He initially advocated a dating system ignoring both Confucius and the emperor and based on the Yellow Emperor, the earliest ancestor of the Han people, but later flip-flopped emphasising how a Confucian dating system would foster historical memory, religiosity, and patriotism among the people.¹

The calendrical reforms proposed by the revolutionaries, by contrast, were motivated by their anti-Manchu and anti-monarchical goals. In July 1903, classical scholar, Liu Shipei argued that dating in accordance with the Yellow Emperor would "raise racial feeling among the Han". Liu rejected the Confucian dating system because it erased millennia of Chinese history before Confucius. Supporting the Yellow Emperor was also a statement on identity that marginalised the hated Manchus while incorporating all Han Chinese. Shortly thereafter, a number of pro-Republican newspapers and journals such as Jiangsu rejected the eponymous dating system and adopted Liu's Yellow Emperor calendar.²

Dualling calendars (1912-1927)

The battles over the eponymous dating system were concluded after the 1911 Republican Revolution when Sun Zhong-

shan, President of the Provisional Government, announced the adoption of a dating system based on the founding of the Republic and the Gregorian solar calendar as the state calendar.

Sun Zhongshan argued that the system would help people remember the founding of the Republic, reduce the number of calendrical adjustments - especially the troublesome lunar intercalary months - and facilitate international trade and foreign relations by using the same calendar as the West. The Parliament of the Provisional Government accepted Sun's rationale, but compromised by ordering that lunisolar calendars, rather than solar calendars, would be published and distributed by the government. Old lunar calendar-based customs could continue, but all references to superstitions or deities must be abolished from the new calendars.

On 13 January 1912, Sun Zhongshan ordered the Ministry of Interior to compile the new calendar. The Beijing Central Observatory was established to produce the official state calendar. The long-time revolutionary and eminent Belgian-educated astronomer Gao Lu was named head of the Observatory. Gao's calendars for the first and second years of the Republic eliminated all references to superstition, arranged the calendar according to solar month, and included information on revolutionary holidays and commemoration days. Traditional names for lunar holidays such as 'Spring Festival' were dropped and replaced with general terms such as the 'First Day'.³

During the early 1920s, a few government officials tried various methods to promote the solar calendar. One such method was Gao Lu's attempt to have everyone shift their birthday to its solar equivalent. Gao's radicalism went furthest in 1924 when he eliminated all lunar dates from the state calendar. This step brought protests from throughout society and various official provincial sources. In the face of such protests the weak Central Government ordered a return to the lunisolar calendar for 1925.

Despite the efforts of progressives like Gao Lu, the conservative warlord leaders of the Beijing Government did little to promote the solar calendar save allowing the more liberal members of its Ministries to give solar New Year as a holiday. In a political culture based on traditional practices, innovations like eliminating the lunar calendar harmed the Government's popular reputation more than it helped it. In this milieu, the social and cultural practices based on the lunar calendar including religious observances, the establishment of market days, the planting and harvesting of crops, the payment of rents, and the clearing of business debts retained a significant hold on the public. Private publishers continued to print lunar calendars containing

all the popular 'superstitious elements' so spurned by the Nationalists, which reportedly sold well among the people.

Out with the old, in with the new, 1928-1935

Upon ascending to power after the Northern Expedition (1926-1928), the Nationalist Party launched an ambitious series of 'revolutionary' policies designed to reshape the polity and economy. The promotion of the solar calendar saw considerable effort on the part of the Nationalists.

In 1928, Minister of the Interior Xue Dubi submitted a proposal to the Executive Yuan on popularising the solar calendar. Based on this draft, the Nationalists' Central Executive Committee, promulgated a procedure for institutionalising the solar calendar. By July 1929, this plan was put in motion by the issuance of National Government Order No. 543 prohibiting the printing of lunar calendars for 1930 as well as banning all lunisolar calendars. In October 1929, the Executive Yuan issued Instruction No. 964 ordering that starting 1 January all business accounts, government and private contracts, and various other official documents must only refer to solar dates.⁴ With these orders in place, the National Government made significant attempts throughout the late 1920s and 1930s to eliminate all 'unscientific' social and cultural practices attached to the lunar calendar.

Hu Hanmin, a leader in both the Nationalist Party and Government, pinpointed businessmen and superstitious people as the two groups primarily responsible for the persistence of the lunar calendar.⁵ Traditionally, merchants cleared their business accounts, paid salaries, and gave bonuses just prior to the lunar New Year. Hu held that customary business practices were unscientific because payments in accordance with the 13-month lunar calendar did not match the government's 12-month solar calendar payment schedules. Hu's arguments were echoed by the Propaganda Department of the Central Executive Committee of the Nationalist Party who argued that the scientific accuracy of the Gregorian solar calendar made business planning more predictable and therefore more conducive to economic growth.⁶ Thus the solar calendar would bring more uniformity, regularity, and predictability to economic endeavours facilitating the modernisation of the economy.

The peasants posed a much greater obstacle to Nationalist Party efforts. The Nationalist Party considered most common people to be filled with feudal and superstitious thoughts. Only by adopting the solar calendar, the Nationalists argued, could the common people begin the 'psychological reconstruction' necessary to mould them into scientific citizens of a modern state. Thus the Nationalists

sought to reorient the cultural identity of the citizenry by breaking their lunar calendar-based cultural traditions.

Throughout their efforts in calendrical reform, the Nationalists repeatedly stressed the modernity of the solar calendar. They noted that many countries had adopted the Gregorian calendar in recent years and even the former home of the Caliphate, Turkey, had abandoned the Islamic calendar in 1926. The Nationalists argued that only 'uncivilised' peoples like the 'American Redman' and 'African Black' failed to understand the importance of calendars and thus were without history. The message was clear, if China remained superstitiously-attached to the lunar calendar, they were inviting their status as a semi-colonial people.⁷

With the discursive ground prepared, the Nationalists issued a series of proclamations between 1928 and 1935 banning the printing, sale, purchase, or use of the lunar calendar and the celebration of all lunar holidays. These bans, according to a large number of both Chinese and English editorials and newspaper reports, were largely ignored by the populace who fought a series of small skirmishes with the Nationalists to defend their cultural identity and traditions. In 1929 the local police in the small Grand Canal city of Haizhou, Jiangsu attempted to stop the public from laying in the usual stores of rice for the lunar New Year. The local grain merchants struck against the government by removing all their grain from the market. Facing such concerted action the government withdrew and allowed the people to buy extra grain. When the Beijing Post Office refused to deliver ever-popular lunar New Year greeting cards, wealthier citizens had them distributed by hand. Most violently, in Suqian, Anhui, the local Small Sword Society joined forces with Buddhist monks to rebel against the elimination of the lunar calendar.⁸ These incidents of active resistance were relatively few in number compared to the almost universal passive resistance to government orders to ignore lunar holidays.

The Nationalist Government realised that the ephemeral gains to be had by forcing the calendar issue were not worth the effort. As with many Nationalist Party initiatives, the calendar issue simply faded away. By 1935 the National Government stopped issuing new proclamations prohibiting the printing of the lunar calendar and celebration of lunar holidays. The government achieved some success with government institutions, mass organisations, and newspapers all recognising the solar calendar, but the rest of the country continued to celebrate, worship, plant, and conduct their everyday affairs in accordance with the cultural traditions of the lunar calendar.



On 1 October 1949 the People's Republic of China was established and immediately adopted the solar calendar and eliminated the eponymous dating based on the founding of the Republic, which is still used in Taiwan. 'Superstitious practices' based on the lunar calendar were reportedly 'stamped out', but lunar festivals are still celebrated. Indeed, celebrations of Chinese lunar New Year have only grown over the past century.

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