Interrupted Transitions: Reform Breakdown, Political Centralization, and Historical Path Dependence in Modern China, 1898–1949

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English analytical edition. This edition presents the argument, evidence notes and source registers of the Chinese master text in analytical form; claim scope follows the verification status stated in the registers. The Chinese edition is the governing text.

Abstract

This article compares seven institutional-choice windows in China from 1898 to 1949. It asks why formal reform commitments and constitutional designs were sometimes unable to generate durable, enforceable political settlements. Four falsifiable mechanisms organize the inquiry: the credibility of institutional commitments; asymmetries in control over armed force and fiscal resources; the conditional effects of external war and diplomacy; and the persistence of emergency organizations across successive crises. Outcomes are disaggregated into rule-making, rule implementation, continuity of political competition, coercive conflict, and territorial-fiscal integration. The present source catalogue is a provenance and acquisition ledger, not a fully authenticated evidentiary base. Accordingly, this paper advances research propositions rather than claiming to have demonstrated their historical causal effects.

Introduction

Accounts of modern Chinese politics often move from proposed reform to disorder and then to renewed concentration of power. Such a sequence can obscure two different analytical questions: whether a rule was formally enacted, and whether the actors expected to obey it possessed both the incentives and institutional means to do so. This paper treats an interrupted transition as an identifiable reform or power-sharing arrangement that was withdrawn, displaced, circumvented, or rendered inoperative before its intended institutional effects could stabilize. The term does not imply that all reforms were democratic, or that central administrative consolidation and political competition always moved in opposite directions.

The comparison encompasses the 1898 reform and the distinct New Policies of 1901–1911; the early Republic, 1912–1916; fragmented authority after 1916; Nanjing consolidation through 1931 with a 1932–1933 bridge; the 1934–1936 security and negotiation window; the war of 1937–1945; and the postwar

constitutional and civil-war years, 1945–1949. The year 1916 is a transition seam rather than two independent observations. This study does not reproduce the existing historical narratives of the 1911 Revolution, Yuan Shikai, or the 1947 Constitution; it tests cross-period mechanisms and cites those adjacent treatments where appropriate.

Theory and method

The credible-commitment hypothesis predicts that political settlements are more fragile when potential losers cannot rely on independent enforcement and when armed actors retain a unilateral exit option. The coercive-resource hypothesis predicts that nominal constitutional authority is insufficient when command over troops and disbursement of revenues remain outside the effective reach of the institutions charged with adjudicating disputes. Neither hypothesis should be treated as a universal law. Evidence of enduring compliance despite divided coercive resources, for example, would weaken a strong version of the second claim.

The external-shock hypothesis is conditional: war, foreign lending, and diplomatic intervention affect institutional outcomes through pre-existing organizational and fiscal structures. The path-dependence hypothesis requires evidence that emergency organizations, personnel, budget lines, or coercive routines persisted across crises. Mere temporal succession is not proof of institutional reproduction. Rival explanations—macroeconomic breakdown, ideology and mobilization, external aggression, and contingent leadership choices—must be assessed in each case.

Because the seven windows are historically connected, they cannot be treated as independent statistical observations. Within-case process tracing should establish the sequence from proposed rules to veto actors, resource control, implementation, and observable outcomes. Each outcome is coded on five dimensions, without collapsing them into a single normative success score. Major causal claims require source-specific verification, competing evidence, and provenance controls. In particular, a reused primary-evidence register flags a collision between 1946 and 1948 proposal numbers; an apparently matching number is insufficient without a year–session–corpus match.

C1: Two institutional clocks in the late Qing

The Hundred Days of 1898 and the New Policies of 1901–1911 are analytically distinct. The first foregrounds authority within the court; the second involves a longer process of administrative, military, educational, and constitutional preparation. Their eventual dynastic endpoint does not demonstrate that every reform instrument failed in the same way. This chapter separates formal rule-making, implementation, continuity of participation, coercive conflict, and territorial-fiscal integration. It tests credible commitments and effective control of armed and fiscal resources against rival explanations involving ethnic politics, mobilization, indemnities, and foreign pressure. The primary records remain unverified.

C2: Legal and resource orders in the early Republic

The early Republic presents a distinction between the distribution of constitutional authority and the practical control of armed forces, appointments, loans, and revenues. This chapter will reconstruct the timing of the provisional constitutional arrangements, parliamentary contestation, subsequent institutional revisions, and military-fiscal decisions. Credible-commitment and coercive-resource explanations must be tested against leadership contingency, coalition breakdown, and international finance. The existence of a constitutional text is not evidence of compliance with its constraints.

C3: Multiple centers of authority after 1916

The 1916 boundary is a transition seam, not a duplicated observation. A differentiated analysis of provincial constitutions, fiscal extraction, and command structures is preferable to treating the entire

Beiyang period as an undifferentiated warlord era. The chapter seeks variation between provincial institutional experiments and predominantly military-fiscal administrations. Enduring interregional rule compliance despite divided armed resources would be a meaningful counterexample to an overly strong coercive-fragmentation hypothesis.

C4: Nanjing consolidation before and after the northeastern crisis

The 1928–1931 baseline and the 1932–1933 post-shock bridge belong to the same case. The chapter will separate pre-existing administrative, fiscal, and command structures from changes associated with Japanese aggression and international economic pressures. The conditional-war hypothesis requires this temporal comparison; later outcomes cannot be projected backward as evidence of pre-shock weakness.

C5: Security assurances and the Xi'an bargaining window

The 1934–1936 period allows a focused inquiry into security guarantees, bargaining, and contingent leadership decisions. Public declarations, internal orders, diplomatic observations, and retrospective memoirs must be distinguished. Memoirs may guide research but cannot alone establish the terms of private assurances. A detailed chronology is needed before attributing particular choices to credible-commitment problems.

C6: Institutional divergence under total war

The war years should be disaggregated by territory, phase, and political-military organization. War disrupted fiscal bases while prompting new forms of extraction, administration, and mobilization. A causal account must compare different organizational responses rather than infer them from aggregate inflation or a single national budget series. Path dependence requires demonstrated continuity of personnel, budget authority, or organizational routines into the postwar period.

C7: Distinct trajectories of constitutional law and political settlement

The postwar chapter separates the 1946 Political Consultative Conference, constitution-making, the 1947 implementation period, military-nationalization negotiations, monetary instability, and civil-war developments. Constitutional adoption establishes a rule-making event; it does not by itself demonstrate cross-party assent or effective constitutional government. A reused primary-evidence register flags a 1946/1948 proposal-number collision, so any claim about a specific military-power proposal requires a year, session, and source-corpus match. Rival explanations involving economic breakdown, battlefield dynamics, ideology, and foreign diplomacy remain open.

Evidence notes on C3, C5 and C6

C3: The two named provincial subcases are Shanxi under Yan Xishan and Fengtian/Northeast under Zhang Zuolin and the Fengtian clique. This is a sampling decision, not a verified finding of fiscal comparability. Provincial revenue, army pay, command authority and representative institutions remain unverified.

C5: A contemporaneous American diplomatic telegram of 16 December 1936 (FRUS 1936, Far East IV, doc. 418, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1936v04/d418) reports multiple possible motivations and explicitly acknowledges uncertainty. It is evidence of contemporary diplomatic knowledge and uncertainty, not proof of participants’ private intentions or later political causation. Verified as the inspected published primary document, with single-source bias.

C6: Publication metadata and abstracts were inspected for Arthur N. Young (1965), Gregg Huff (2015), and Andrew Chung Huang (1948). These are research leads or inspected secondary summaries, not a substitute for original budget and monetary statistics. No precise empirical O2–O5 coding is asserted.

C7 evidence: three distinct bargaining tracks

A memorandum prepared by Philip D. Sprouse on January 1, 1946, reported a provisional 38-member allocation for the Political Consultative Council and observed that the binding force of its decisions had not yet been defined. This is evidence of contemporary diplomatic reporting, not proof that the projected delegates ultimately participated or that any resulting settlement was implemented (FRUS 1946, IX, doc.31, pp.132–133). In a January 13 memorandum Sprouse described disputes over the May Fifth Draft Constitution, including opposition concerns about executive authority and legislative fiscal oversight; his summary cannot be substituted for the enacted constitutional text (doc.35, pp.137–138). On January 31, Marshall reported to Truman that both parties had invited him to advise on army reorganization and that he had begun drafting a plan; the communication does not demonstrate compliance with that plan (doc.41).

A July 1946 CCP manifesto preserved in the same diplomatic volume expressed its author's public political demands, while an April 1946 US observer report offered critical inferences about the party's future intentions (docs.645 and 398). These are distinct kinds of evidence—partisan claims and external assessments—neither of which proves hidden intentions. Taken together, the records justify treating constitutional design, multiparty bargaining, and military integration as separate institutional tracks. They do not yet establish whether Hypothesis 1 (H1, credible commitment) or Hypothesis 2 (H2, military–fiscal asymmetry) caused the subsequent breakdown. All five documents are inspected as published FRUS texts, but independent Chinese archival and implementation evidence remains necessary.

Chapter Eleven — Negative Cases and Limits of Causal Inference

The selection of seven institutional-choice windows creates an obvious risk of selecting on the dependent variable. If the inquiry includes only reforms that were eventually displaced, it may reproduce the proposition that all reforms fail by construction. The appropriate dependent variables are therefore not regime survival or retrospective political victory, but five distinct institutional outcomes: the adoption of rules, their actual implementation, the durability of political competition, the incidence of coercive conflict, and the integration of territorial and fiscal authority. A regime's collapse does not prove that every institutional practice within it was ineffective; conversely, a regime's survival is not evidence that meaningful political competition endured.

In the late Qing case, the 1898 proposals must be distinguished from the institutional experiments of 1901–1911. Evidence of sustained provincial deliberation would qualify a categorical claim that reform never became institutionalized, even if the dynasty subsequently fell. In the early Republic, the issue is whether legal constraints were enforced when the presidency, legislature, armed forces, and fiscal authorities disagreed. The 1916 boundary separates mechanisms rather than generating two independent observations of the same event.

The Beiyang years require comparisons among specific provinces rather than treating warlord fragmentation as a uniform causal condition. The Nanjing case requires a baseline before 1931, with 1932–1933 assigned to the post-shock bridge: administrative and fiscal consolidation may have evolved differently from political competition. The 1934–1936 bargaining window requires direct evidence of security expectations and compliance, not an inevitable account of the Xi'an Incident. Wartime fiscal and organizational trajectories must be disaggregated across territories and periods. The postwar case requires separate treatment of the 1946 negotiations, constitutional adoption, implementation in 1947, military nationalization, and the subsequent fiscal and military crises.

Each of the four hypotheses has a distinct observable implication. A credible-commitment explanation requires contemporaneous evidence that actors anticipated defection and changed strategy because of that

risk; later conflict alone is insufficient. A coercive-resource explanation requires proof that discrepancies between formal authority and actual command or disbursement blocked specific rules. A conditional external-shock explanation requires a pre-shock baseline and consideration of trends already underway. A path-dependence explanation requires demonstrable continuity of personnel, organizational powers, budgets, or routines across crises; chronological succession is not enough.

The evidence ledger must identify each causal proposition, its date, supporting and contrary records, independence of source paths, and a verdict of supported, partially supported, contradicted, or unresolved. Uninspected documents and bibliographic leads remain unverified, and repeated citations of the same archival item across research programmes do not constitute independent corroboration. At the current stage, no single mechanism can responsibly be declared decisive across all seven windows. This is an explicit limit on the paper's eventual claims, not a merely rhetorical caveat.

附表：史料登记与各章证据状态 / Source registers and evidence status by chapter

已核验史料附表 / Inspected source register

- V01: Philip D. Sprouse, Memorandum, January 1, 1946, FRUS 1946, The Far East: China, vol. IX, doc.31, pp.132–133. Inspected public text; contemporaneous diplomatic report. Supports: provisional delegate allocation and uncertainty about PCC authority. Does not support: final participation, actual compliance, true private intentions.
- V02: Philip D. Sprouse, Memorandum, January 13, 1946, FRUS 1946, vol. IX, doc.35, pp.137–138. Inspected public text; diplomatic summary of the May Fifth Draft Constitution. Supports: reported constitutional debate and contemporary objections. Does not support: authenticated text of the final 1946 constitution.
- V03: George C. Marshall to Harry S. Truman, January 31, 1946, FRUS 1946, vol. IX, doc.41. Inspected public text. Supports: Marshall's account of military reorganization consultations. Does not support: plan implementation.
- V04: Xinhua News Agency draft of CCP central committee manifesto, July 5/7, 1946, FRUS 1946, vol. IX, doc.645. Inspected public text; partisan primary statement preserved in diplomatic archive. Supports: expressed CCP positions. Does not independently substantiate accusations about others.
- V05: Col. Ivan D. Yeaton, Extract of Yenan Observer Group final report, April 15, 1946, FRUS 1946, vol. IX, doc.398. Inspected public text; observer inference. Supports: what the US observer assessed, not objective proof of another actor's intentions.

Evidence status: verified for the fact that the published FRUS document text reports the stated content; not verified for underlying contested allegations or unverified intentions. Original manuscript archival scans not checked. FRUS editorial transcription is an edited primary-source publication. Independent Chinese-side corroboration is still required.

C7 directly consulted FRUS citation register

U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, The Far East: China*, Vol. IX, edited by Ralph R. Goodwin (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), table of contents. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v09/toc. Type: edited primary-document collection; verified table of contents; does not establish document-level claims.

“Minutes of Meeting Between General Marshall and Governor Chang Chun,” Chongqing, January 25, 1946, FRUS 1946, Vol. IX, Document 39. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v09/d39. Type: contemporary meeting minutes in official documentary edition; direct inspection of online edition; one party's report, not independent consensus verification.

“Minutes of Meeting Between General Marshall and General Chang Chun,” Chongqing, January 24, 1946, FRUS 1946, Vol. IX, Document 74, pp. 197–198 as printed. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v09/d74. Type: contemporary minutes; direct inspection; interpretations of participants' motives remain tentative.

“Minutes of Meeting Between General Chou En-lai and General Marshall,” Chongqing, February 4, 1946, FRUS 1946, Vol. IX, Document 78, pp. 205–206 as printed. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v09/d78. Type: contemporary minutes; direct inspection; demonstrates recorded negotiation positions rather than implementation.

“Minutes of Conference Between General Marshall and General Chen Cheng,” Nanjing, May 7, 1946, FRUS 1946, Vol. IX, Document 122, p. 340 as printed. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v09/d122. Type: contemporary minutes; direct inspection; fiscal and personnel figures require independent verification.

“Memorandum by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek,” Nanjing, October 13, 1946, FRUS 1946, Vol. X, Document 183. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v10/d183. Type: contemporary memorandum in official documentary edition; direct inspection; statement of proposal rather than implementation.

Constitutional-text reference register

FRUS, 1908, “Memorial and edict on constitutional government, August 27, 1908,” https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1908/d183 ; contemporaneous translated primary document, inspected web edition; translation and enforcement not independently validated. FRUS, 1908, Chargé Fletcher to Secretary of State, January 7, 1908, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1908/d179 ; diplomatic report with translated edict, inspected; selective source perspective. FRUS, 1914, text of Provisional Constitution of 1912, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1914/d52 ; published primary-text translation inspected; text does not demonstrate practice. FRUS, 1913, document on presidential titles and oath, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1913/d89 ; contemporary diplomatic correspondence inspected; narrow factual scope. Columbia Law Library catalogue, *Provisional constitution for the period of political tutelage of the Republic of China* (1931), https://pegasus.law.columbia.edu/record/352864 ; inspected bibliographic record ONLY, not full official text. The Greater China Journal, *Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China (1931)*, https://china-journal.org/2016/05/31/provisional-constitution-of-the-republic-of-china-1931/ ; inspected nonofficial transcription; primary edition comparison pending. Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), constitutional introduction, https://english.president.gov.tw/Page/7 ; official modern explanatory source inspected; historical practice not established. Judicial Yuan, *Constitution* (English), https://cons.judicial.gov.tw/uploads/docAtt/d89346d8-1cb1-409a-aba2-adaa838ba6ee.pdf ; official constitutional text inspected in search excerpt; historical version controls required.

各章来源核验状态 / Source authentication status by chapter

Case	Inspected evidence in this edition	Unverified primary evidence	Conclusion supported
C1	FRUS 1908 d183 memorial/edict inspected (inspected in full; translated text)	Proceedings and implementation records not yet inspected; Chinese-original collation pending	O1-text discussion only; no causal verdict
C2	FRUS 1914 d52 full Provisional Constitution inspected (inspected in full; translated text)	Parliamentary, army and loan	O1-text discussion only

Case	Inspected evidence in this edition	Unverified primary evidence	Conclusion supported
		execution records not yet inspected	
C3	Shanxi vs Fengtian subcases named	Provincial budgets, command records and local assemblies not yet inspected	Framework only; no empirical O2–O5
C4	1931 tutelage constitution transcription inspected (transcription inspected; the catalogue record alone is not the text)	Fiscal series and provincial-implementation records not yet inspected	Provisional O1 only
C5	FRUS 1936 v.IV docs.418/423/425 inspected (text inspected; single US source path)	Chinese-side minutes, diaries and command records not yet inspected	Contemporary uncertainty documented; outcomes unresolved
C6	Secondary bibliography and accessible abstracts checked	Original fiscal, monetary and military records not yet inspected	Mechanism hypothesis only
C7	FRUS 1946 texts inspected: Principal FRUS 1946 texts and a further subset inspected in full; two earlier transcripts also checked	Independent Chinese sources and implementation evidence not yet inspected	Narrow O1 and contemporaneous claims only

Important: Source verification applies to *the particular inspected item*, not to every document named in the source catalogue. The underlying source leads remain unverified until individually inspected; no promotion by association. No claims of complete primary authentication.

English C5 evidence addendum

The American ambassador's telegram of 17 December 1936 reported the National Government's announcement of a punitive expedition against Zhang Xueliang, headed by War Minister He Yingqin, and relayed contemporary estimates of deployments around Xi'an. The record establishes what was reported to Washington, not the accuracy of troop strengths, the decision-makers' private intentions, or the operation's subsequent implementation. Read alongside the telegram of 16 December (FRUS document 418), it offers a narrow sequence of reported policy responses, not independent source corroboration: both are US diplomatic reporting within the same edited collection. Code only a reported O1 announcement; O2–O5 remain unverified pending Chinese military and negotiating records.

English. At 4 p.m. on 17 December 1936, Ambassador Johnson reported the release of Chiang Ting-wen, who was expected to carry a personal letter from Chiang Kai-shek to Nanjing. The same telegram described divergent reported preferences within Nanjing: younger army officers favored force, whereas H. H. Kung and Madame Chiang Kai-shek favored negotiation. This is diplomatic reporting about political preferences, not minutes of the actors' own deliberations. It supports the narrow inference that multiple policy options were contemporaneously reported, not that any bargaining mechanism or subsequent outcome has been established. H1 remains a hypothesis requiring Chinese-side records.

Source: US Department of State, *FRUS 1936, The Far East*, vol. IV, doc. 425, Johnson to Secretary of State, Nanking, 17 December 1936, 4 p.m., https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1936v04/d425 . **Verified** for the text of the contemporaneous published diplomatic telegram; **unverified** as independent verification of the reported political positions. From the same FRUS corpus as the preceding addendum, so no false independence

claim. O1 reported policy alternatives; O2–O5 remain unverified.

Related reading

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