Building a Center in the Periphery: Multiple Sovereignty in China, 1917–1925

Abstract

Existing scholarship on state-building analyzes struggles over the center, the incorporation of peripheries, and peripheral influence on central authority, but it typically assumes a single center and misses competitive dynamics among multiple would-be centers. This paper asks why elites go to peripheries to make an alternative center and why some endeavors succeeded while others failed. Revisiting Sun Yat-sen's three attempts to build an alternative central government in Guangzhou in 1917-1925, I advance a theory of polycentric state-building in which the de jure center confronts rival proto-states that seek to become de facto centers. By analyzing newspaper articles alongside telegrams, letters, and gazettes, I argue that when a state maintains relatively strong control over the center but weak control over the periphery, challengers who both aspire to and are capable of seizing national power are likely to move to the periphery and establish an alternative center there. In this process, they often depend on the cooperation of local particularists. Yet once a new center has been established, it confronts challenges similar to those faced by the old regime, namely, rivalry from competing actors within the center and resistance from proponents of local autonomy. Whether the new regime can manage these challenges is crucial to its survival or failure. This study offers a new perspective for analyzing the entangled relationship among rebellion, revolution, and state-making.

Keywords: State Formation, Center-Periphery, Political Discourse, Elite Competition

INTRODUCTION

In most political sociology and historical social science, an often unspoken premise is that the political "center" is singular, claiming to represent the polity, whereas the periphery is multiple, to be governed, incorporated, and coordinated. A question that remains underexplored is what happens when there are multiple centers within the same polity.

A classic answer is that polycentricity signals multiple sovereignty, the defining feature of revolutionary situations (Tilly 1978). Building on this line of thought, scholars have focused on two broad kinds of struggle. The first is conflict *over the center*. Here, the core question is who controls sovereign institutions at the political core, through coups, revolutions, or regime collapse and reconstruction (Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979; Goldstone 1991; Goodwin 2001; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Once conflict over the center is settled, there is a second kind of struggle: conflict *between* center and periphery. State builders seek to penetrate the periphery through taxation, conscription, bureaucratic appointment, police power, or party organization, while peripheral actors resist, bargain, and attempt to preserve autonomy or reshape incorporation on favorable terms (Tilly 1992; Mann 1986; Migdal 2001; Boone 2003; Herbst 2000; Scott 1998). In both families of argument, the state is still imagined as organized around a singular center, and the key variation lies in whether it is captured or consolidated at the core, and whether it is extended successfully into the periphery.

In this article, I focus on an alternative situation: forging a center at the periphery. This phenomenon appears especially in large territories where the state's infrastructural reach is uneven and where peripheral elites command coercive and fiscal resources that allow them to assemble governing capacities outside the de jure capital (Mann 1986; Herbst 2000; Boone 2003). Under these conditions, rebellious elites may relocate to peripheral arenas and build an alternative state whose orbit overlaps with that of the old regime, thereby competing with it.

Two existing theories speak to this type of elite action, but only partially. Revolution theory emphasizes that when contenders who hold power over a regional government assert sovereignty, the episode may become a colonial or national revolution if the outcome is independence (Tilly 1978). Yet this perspective cannot explain why, in some cases, the two centers become permanently separated, whereas in other cases they annex one another or merge into a single center. Center–periphery models emphasize how local actors resist, bargain over, and evade state penetration, but they offer less leverage for explaining how those same actors manage center–periphery relations once they themselves attempt to become a center (Migdal 2001; Boone 2003).

I argue that a fractal centrality–locality model can best explain this type of struggle. I define *centrality* as the characteristics of being a political center, whereas *locality* refers to the characteristics of a subnational unit. By analytically separating centrality and locality from center and periphery as spatial labels, I show that prior scholarship has concentrated on struggles over centrality at the center and on the defense or reduction of locality in the periphery. Much less has been said about bringing locality into the center, or forging centrality at the periphery.

Moreover, peripheral center building is not a linear endpoint. Following Abbott's (2001) insight that social structures often evolve through recurrent differentiations and recombinations, center making should be expected to operate as a fractal process. Once a new center is built, it becomes vulnerable to the same three pressures that characterize center–periphery politics more broadly. The new center can be contested by rivals struggling over its institutions and leadership. It can face center–periphery conflicts as subordinate regions demand autonomy or bargain over incorporation. And it can face further peripheral center building as actors at new margins attempt to produce yet another locus of centrality.

This helps explain why elites go to the periphery to establish centers, and why some attempts fail and others succeed. I take as my case Sun Yat-sen's three efforts (1917-1919, 1920-

1922, and 1923-1925) to establish in Guangzhou a government independent of the Beijing-based central authorities. Drawing on the curation of large-scale historical sources and a mixed strategy that combines computational mapping of macro political-ideational dynamics with close interpretive analysis of elite conflict, I argue that peripheral center-building becomes attractive when challengers are unable to capture the existing center and, at the same time, the existing center is too weak to penetrate and discipline peripheral actors. Such projects can gain early momentum through coalitions between would-be central incumbents and local resisters. Yet once established, the emergent center confronts pressures similar to those that undermined the old one: opposition from rivals within the coalition and resistance from actors outside it, especially when the new state attempts to expand its reach and extract resources from society and local power holders. The fate of the emergent center, and thus the outcome of competition between old and new centers, depends on whether it can manage these internal and external challenges more effectively than its predecessor.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it offers a theory of polycentric state formation that complements existing center–periphery accounts by treating centrality as a produced, multi-dimensional property and by specifying peripheral center-making as a distinct mechanism through which elites resist and reconfigure state-building projects (Ertman 2003; Tilly 1992; Migdal 2001; Boone 2003). Second, it brings a comparative-historical state formation lens to debates on federalism, showing how federal projects can operate not only as constitutional designs but also as contentious strategies for producing or reweighting political centers under conditions of fractured sovereignty (Riker 1964; Stepan 1999; Ziblatt 2006). Third, it offers a new interpretation of early Republican Chinese federalism as a state-building project rather than an epiphenomenon of warlord politics, highlighting how actors commonly cast as defenders of national unity could, in specific conjunctures, become proponents of peripheral center building, and how that repositioning shaped the movement's trajectory (Chi 1976; McCord 1993; Strand 1989).

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. I begin by reviewing state formation scholarship through a center–periphery lens and clarifying the monocentric default that structures much of the field. I then introduce the historical background of the federalist movement and explain why existing theories are insufficient to capture the movement's internal struggle over centrality. Next, I develop the mechanism model of polycentric state formation and operationalize centrality's three dimensions. I then present the macro analysis of political-ideational dynamics and the micro analysis of elite conflict that together explain the movement's rise and decline. I conclude by discussing implications for comparative state formation, federalism, and the study of political order under conditions of fractured sovereignty.

OBJECTS AND POSITIONS OF THE STRUGGLE: FOUR APPROACHES

Much of historical sociology approaches state formation through a monocentric baseline. They typically presume a single national center and ask how it is captured, consolidated, and extended across territory (Weber 1978; Mann 1986; Tilly 1992; Ertman 2003). To clarify what this literature emphasizes and what it leaves under-theorized, I distinguish between two political properties and two arenas of struggle. Centrality refers to the produced capacity and legitimacy to represent the polity and coordinate rule at a national scale. It encompasses at least three dimensions: symbolic centrality, that is, recognition as a legitimate central authority; material centrality, that is, control over the allocation of resource flows; and relational centrality, that is, the power to determine the movement of personnel and to serve as the nodal point of information flows. Locality refers to the legitimation of subnational units as rightful sites of rule, including claims to jurisdiction, autonomy, and locally grounded authority (Riker 1964; Stepan 1999; Ziblatt 2006).

Mapped onto the capital versus subnational arenas, existing monocentric scholarship concentrates on three recurrent traditions. First, it foregrounds capital-based contests over centrality, from revolutionary rupture to reform and intra-elite reconfiguration, as struggles to control the sovereign core (Skocpol 1979; Goldstone 1991; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Second, it focuses on subnational struggles over locality, tracing how local authorities defend, negotiate, or lose jurisdiction under projects of territorial incorporation and administrative penetration (Migdal 2001; Boone 2003; Scott 1998; Herbst 2000). Third, a smaller literature highlights capital-based projects that institutionalize locality, most visibly in federal bargains and related constitutional settlements (Riker 1964; Stepan 1999), and in postcolonial accounts that foreground how metropolitan political orders are forged through imperial encounters and the co-constitution of center and periphery (Cooper 2005; Chatterjee 2004; Go 2013). Next, I first review the literature in these three strands and then theorize the conditions under which building a center at the periphery emerges, as well as the challenges it confronts.

Table 1. Objects and positions of struggle

Object\Position	Center	Periphery
Centrality	Revolution, coup d'état	Multiple sovereignty
Locality	Federation formation	Insurgence

Contesting Centrality at the Center

Contesting centrality at the center refers to conflicts oriented toward controlling or reshaping the institutional core of the polity: the executive apex and the key organizations through which coercion, extraction, and coordination are organized. This scholarship includes at least two broad traditions. One emphasizes contentious politics, analyzing how challengers outside the state attempt to seize, transform, or constrain the center through revolutions and other mass mobilizations. The other emphasizes elite conflicts, examining how incumbents and rival elites within the state apparatus contest centrality by reconfiguring coalitions, redesigning institutions, and pursuing reform from above.

For contentious politics, one of the most common and well-studied forms of center-targeting struggles is revolution. As a modern state formed, its capacity and autonomy grew, and it played a more active role in facilitating economic development, participating in international affairs, and shaping social conflicts (Evans et al. 1985). It altered the distribution of political power and resources, created grievances through the processes of exploitation and exclusion, and impacted the organization and mobilization capacities of social groups (Tilly 1978). As the incumbents of the state becomes more powerful by extracting resources from society, the center of the state becomes a lucrative target for the center to seize. Thus, on one hand, strong states' transformative power is more conducive to revolutions (Davidheiser 1992), although strong states do not cause revolutions. And, on the other hand, the stronger the state, the more capable it is to suppress rebellions, so it is usually in the moments of "state breakdown" that large-scale revolutions happen (Goldstone 2010: 10-12).

After the center is seized, institutional change at the central level may occur. Moore's (1993 [1966]) groundbreaking work explains how revolutions of different natures gave rise to different types of regimes. Moreover, although challengers have been victims of a powerful state, once they seize the center, they tend to strengthen it. As Skocpol (2015 [1979]) argues, on one hand, that the administrative-fiscal crises of the state and defeats in inter-state competitions caused social revolutions, and, on the other hand, that the post-revolutionary state created a more powerful and consolidated bureaucratic structure, enhancing state capacity. Her theory is developed by later researchers who find that the monitoring capacity of states is the mediator between revolution and post-revolution bureaucratization (Kiser and Kane 2001), and postrevolutionary regimes' stronger capacity to mobilize populations, extract economic resources, and win wars (Carter et al. 2012). Beyond revolutions, the contentious politics literature shows that nonviolent mass mobilization can also reshape the center by raising the costs of repression, provoking elite defections, and forcing bargains over rules of succession and authority (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Tarrow 1998; Goodwin 2001; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). In short, this tradition conceptualizes contestation over centrality as a struggle in which broad mobilization can precipitate regime transformation, whether through rupture or negotiated reconstitution.

A second tradition, centered on elite conflicts, shifts attention from mass mobilization to struggles among incumbents and rivals inside the state apparatus, where centrality is contested through coalition management and institutional redesign. Classic state-building accounts underscore that consolidation at the center depends on durable control over coercion and extraction and on institutions that regulate access to offices and resources (Weber 1978; Tilly 1992; Levi 1988). From this perspective, "center contestation" includes not only dramatic ruptures but also routine reconfigurations of governing coalitions and organizational capacities. Historical institutionalist work further argues that consequential change at the center often proceeds through gradual mechanisms such as layering and conversion, allowing actors to shift distributions of power without overt breakdown (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). Network- and organization-oriented studies add that elite dominance frequently rests on relational structures and brokerage positions that enable strategic action under uncertainty, thereby stabilizing rule while keeping options open (Padgett and Ansell 1993; Padgett and Powell 2012). Finally, comparative-historical accounts of reform from above emphasize that incumbents may reorganize central institutions in response to geopolitical pressure, fiscal constraints, or elite deadlock, producing state transformations that are center-driven rather than insurgent-led (Moore 1966; Trimberger 1978). Taken together, these studies treat the center not as a fixed arena but as an organizational object continuously remade through elite conflict, institutional change, and capacity-building.

Center-Resisting Struggles

While some actors contest centrality in the capital, others fight over locality in the provinces by resisting, renegotiating, or selectively accommodating the center's penetration into local jurisdictions. In monocentric models, center–periphery relations are a constitutive arena in which the territorial reach of rule is built and where the political standing of subnational units is defended or eroded. Put differently, struggles in the provinces often turn on whether local authorities can remain rightful sites of rule, or whether their jurisdiction is converted into administrative appendages of a single center.

In classic models, the center tries to assimilate and exploite the periphery, reducing its autonomy and extracting its resources (Tilly 1992). This process gave rise to mass contention at the local level. For instance, the Vendée rebellion was deeply rooted in the resistance against the interference of the revolutionary state, markets, and bourgeois property in rural communities, which historically had their own privileges and liberties (Tilly 1964). At the same time, the organization of local government, together with the timing of international military competition, can in turn shape the regime type and infrastructural type of the central state (Ertman 1997).

More recently, cultural and interpretive approaches have reframed center–periphery tensions as struggles over symbolic power, categories, and the meaning of legitimate rule. Cultural and interpretive approaches to center–periphery relations can be grouped into three complementary emphases. One highlights how "the state" and central authority are produced in peripheral settings through administrative practices and boundary-making, and how these state effects are contested on the ground (Loveman 2005; Mitchell 1991). A second focuses on how states seek to absorb local particularities into centralized universals through classification, standardization, and simplification, generating resistance, evasion, and unintended consequences that limit incorporation (Scott 1998; Bourdieu 2014). A third emphasizes the cultural and performative conditions under which centrality becomes publicly recognized and accepted, showing how authority is stabilized through shared cultural forms and public interpretations of coercion and negotiation (Ikegami 2005; Reed 2019). Taken together, these perspectives underscore that center–periphery conflict is never purely material: it is also fought over administrative practices, classificatory schemes, and public meanings that determine where legitimate rule properly resides.

Bring Locality to the Center

Another literature shows that locality can shape centrality at the center by forcing constitutional bargains that reorganize the institutional core. This includes scholarships on federalism and on postcolonialism.

Rather than treating federal arrangements as mere "concessions" granted by an already consolidated center, Ziblatt's (2006 [2008]) work emphasizes how subunits' preexisting organizational capacities, fiscal bases, and political cohesion condition what kinds of central authority can be credibly built in the first place. His analysis of nineteenth-century unification highlights that robust subnational institutions can become the building blocks of federal founding, constraining state-builders and channeling the construction of central authority toward a negotiated, territorially differentiated center. From a political-sociological angle, federal bargains can be read as center-making projects that translate conflicts over jurisdiction into durable institutional forms: they embed locality in the very definition of the center, setting the terms under which coercion, extraction, and coordination become nationally legitimate (Riker 1964; Stepan 1999). In multinational settings, sociological work further suggests that the center's survival and consolidation often depend on whether it can repackage subnational claims into institutionalized autonomy, thereby redefining centrality as the capacity to coordinate diversity rather than eliminate it (Hechter 2000; Beissinger 2002).

Postcolonial perspectives similarly challenge center-first accounts by treating metropolitan authority as forged through imperial encounters and peripheral difference rather than simply projected outward (Chatterjee 2004; Cooper 2005). Go (2013) argues that core and periphery are interactionally co-constituted across space, challenging accounts that treat the metropole as the sole origin of political forms and pushing us to examine how imperial relations reshape metropolitan institutions and sociological categories. Steinmetz (2007) offers a concrete mechanism for such feedback: colonial governance was not a uniform application of a metropolitan template but was profoundly shaped by "precoloniality," including colonizers' ethnographic imaginaries and locally specific modes of cooperation and resistance, producing divergent colonial policies across Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa. Read together, these works suggest that locality can shape centrality not only through formal constitutional bargains but also through relational settings in which governing centers are compelled to revise their repertoires, classifications, and institutional strategies in response to the structured differences of the periphery.

Building Center at The Periphery

The currently undertheorized dynamic is that of building a center at the periphery, which I define as an effort to create the institutional and symbolic attributes of a center within provincial arenas. This dynamic typically arises when the state is just strong enough to maintain control over the center, yet not strong enough to penetrate the periphery. Under such conditions, challengers to the state can neither effectively shape politics at the center nor sustain a degree of autonomy in the periphery, whether because they are unable or unwilling to do so. As a result, they are pushed toward a strategy of establishing an alternative center in the periphery.

Once a polycentric order emerges, peripheral center-building can lead to three broad outcomes. One is *independence*, in which the new center stabilizes as a separate sovereign authority. A second is *negotiated settlement*, in which rival centers bargain toward institutional fusion or a new constitutional framework that redefines the terms of centrality and locality. A third is *annexation*, in which one center absorbs or replaces the other, claiming monopoly over national representation.

The ultimate outcome depended not only on conflict and competition between centers, as traditional theories have emphasized, but also on conflict and competition within each of the two centers, because polycentricity generates what might be called a fractal problem. Newly built centers confront the same pressures that afflicted the old: centrality can be contested within the new center, subnational actors can resist or reshape the new center's penetration, and other peripheral actors can attempt to replicate centrality again. In this sense, the dynamics of center-building can recur across scales, producing repeated fissions, partial consolidations, and recombinations rather than a single, irreversible trajectory. Only when an emergent center is better able than the old center to overcome tendencies toward further fragmentation and challenges from rivals can it survive and eventually replace or absorb the latter.

Next, I use the case of early Republican China to show why building a new center in the periphery became a recurring tendency, and how Sun Yat-sen, through three successive attempts to establish a central government in the periphery, gradually stabilized the new center and endowed it with the potential to replace the old one.

DATA AND METHOD

This article uses a qualitative historical strategy centered on process tracing and source triangulation to reconstruct Sun Yat-sen's attempts to build a rival center of political authority in South China between 1917 and 1925. I begin by constructing a chronological event database from *Chronology of the Father of the Nation* (Guofu nianpu), a two-volume chronology published by the Party History Committee of the Central Committee of the Chinese Nationalist Party and accessed through the Sunology Database (Zhongshan xueshu ziliaoku) (Party History Committee of the Central Committee of the Chinese Nationalist Party 1994). This database provides the temporal scaffold of the analysis and helps identify major political episodes, institutional initiatives, military crises, and shifts in Sun's organizational strategy across his successive Guangzhou regimes.

I then verify and supplement this scaffold with several bodies of primary materials. First, I use *Complete Works of the Father of the Nation* (Guofu quanji) to check the wording, dating, and political context of Sun's speeches, manifestos, telegrams, letters, and other published writings (Editorial Committee of *Complete Works of the Father of the Nation* 1989). Second, I systematically search the first twenty volumes of *Compilation of Archival Materials on the History of the Republic of China* (Zhonghua Minguo shi dangan ziliao huibian) for personal names, organizations, and event markers in order to recover official correspondence, telegrams, memorials, and administrative documents from both the Beijing and Guangzhou governments (Second Historical Archives of China 1979–1997). Third, I use the National Index to Chinese Newspapers and Periodicals (Quanguo baokan suoyin) to trace contemporaneous press coverage, public commentary, and episodes that were omitted from, or flattened in, official documentary compilations (Shanghai Library n.d.). Other materials consulted include archival documents held at the Second Historical Archives of China and edited collections such as *Collected Works of Chen Jiongming* (Chen Jiongming ji), which provide additional access to rival political claims, administrative practice, and alternative visions of political order (Chen 1998). Rather than treating these materials as interchangeable, I use them against one another. The chronology identifies candidate episodes, Sun's own writings clarify strategic self-presentation, official archives illuminate intergovernmental interaction, documentary collections preserve materials dispersed across different repositories, and newspapers reveal publicity, reception, and information absent from formal state records

The analysis proceeds through a strategically bounded single-case design geared toward theory development rather than broad population inference (Emigh 1997; Steinmetz 2004). It treats Sun Yat-sen's three Guangzhou regimes of 1917, 1920, and 1923 as sequential episodes within a larger process of center building at the periphery, taking episodes rather than political systems as the primary units of analysis (Clemens 2007). This design makes it possible to compare successive attempts to establish a rival center, to identify recurrent obstacles such as fragmentation, unstable coalition building, and rival claims to authority, and to trace the institutional and symbolic innovations through which later efforts built on earlier ones. Following Stinchcombe (1978) and Haydu (1998), the analysis approaches causation at the segmented level, tracing how specific episodes of governmental founding, military confrontation, coalition reorganization, and institutional consolidation reshaped the strategic terrain for subsequent efforts. The sequential comparison also sharpens causal inference by placing less durable and more durable attempts side by side and by recovering alternatives that were historically available at critical junctures but remained unrealized (Moore 1978). Throughout, process tracing rests on triangulation across the chronological database, Sun's published writings, official archives, documentary compilations, and contemporaneous newspapers, allowing the analysis to reconstruct both political action and the contested interpretations through which a new center gradually acquired greater stability and authority.

BACKGROUND: THE COLLAPSE OF A FRAGILE MONOCENTRIC ORDER AND THE RISE OF REGIONALISM (1912–1917)

Central–local tension in modern China was forged through a crisis-driven decentralization of governance and regionalization of coercive power in the late Qing, especially as the court relied on locally raised forces during mid-nineteenth-century rebellions and later reforms produced modern armies, the so-called New Army, rooted in provincial elites' patronage networks (Kuhn 1970; MacKinnon 1980; Zhang 2021). After 1900, the Boxer crisis and the "Southeast Mutual Protection" episode made visible how provincial authorities could insulate their jurisdictions from Beijing's policies, while late-Qing constitutional reforms expanded provincial representation and turned "the province" into a legible political constituency by establishing provincial assemblies (Chen 2012; Yan and Leung 2020). In this period, among progressive elites, constitutionalists and revolutionaries had a heated debate about how to transform China.

However, the Qing court's reform was too slow and incomplete to satisfy constitutionalists who gradually turned to sympathize revolutionaries. When the 1911 Revolution began with mutiny among modern troops in Hubei, it rapidly triggered a cascade of provincial secessions. The revolution succeeded across many southern provinces but was suppressed in much of the north. After Yuan Shikai and the Beiyang Army repelled revolutionary forces in Hubei, the two sides reached a stalemate. On January 1, 1912, delegates from the seceded provinces convened in Nanjing to establish the Provisional Government of the Republic of China and adopted the *Outline of the Organization of the Provisional Government of the Republic of China*, a document with discernible federalist features. The founder of Tongmenghui (later reorganized as Kuomintang, KMT), Sun Yatsen, was elected as the provisional president. Against the backdrop of continuing North–South confrontation, Yuan opened negotiations with the provisional authorities and agreed to compel the Qing emperor's abdication in exchange for the southern government's recognition of him as the Republic's formal president. In Zhang Yongle's (2011) formulation, a "Great Compromise" among the Qing court, Beiyang militarists, revolutionaries, and constitutionalists enabled abdication and a legal transfer of sovereignty to "the people," allowing the Republic to claim succession to much of the Qing realm.

This compromise-based political settlement soon proved unstable. The KMT initially sought to compete with Yuan Shikai for power within the central state. After China's first parliamentary elections in February 1913, the KMT emerged victorious, and in principle its party leadership was positioned to form a cabinet and use the premiership to constrain presidential authority. In March, however, Song Jiaoren was assassinated. Sun Yat-sen, then traveling in

Japan, immediately returned to convene party leaders and argued for a military campaign against Yuan, but the KMT itself was divided over whether to escalate to armed confrontation. Tensions further intensified when Yuan secured a foreign loan of £25 million without parliamentary approval, deepening conflict between the presidency and the legislature. Sun subsequently mobilized KMT-aligned military governors to rise against Yuan, which was called the Second Revolution. Several southern provinces declared independence and joined the anti-Yuan revolt, but the insurgency was ultimately suppressed by Yuan's forces.

Suppression of the Second Revolution was not only a victory at the center but also a project against the provinces. In 1913–1914, Yuan re-engineered provincial governance so that local representative and administrative structures would no longer serve as bases for autonomous politics. He dissolved provincial assemblies, reorganized provincial administrations into more directly controlled central outposts, recentralized key fiscal arrangements, and altered the official nomenclature and command structure of provincial strongmen to reduce localism.

Yuan's consolidation project unraveled in 1915–1916 largely of his own making. By attempting to crown himself emperor, he transformed an effort at executive centralization into a legitimacy crisis that enabled southwestern militarists to claim the mantle of "protecting the republic." The insurgents not only declared provincial independence and challenged Beijing's authority, but also established the Republic of China Military Affairs Council (*Junwu yuan*) to coordinate armed opposition, thereby gesturing toward an alternative center. Yuan's death in 1916 did not restore a stable monocentric order; instead, it intensified factional competition within the Beijing government. The ensuing president–premier struggle between President Li Yuanhong and Premier Duan Qirui culminated in the 1917 constitutional crisis. After Li attempted to dismiss Duan, Duan and his allied military governors mobilized extra-constitutional pressure and explored organizing authority outside Beijing. Zhang Xun entered the capital ostensibly to mediate the conflict but instead launched a short-lived restoration of the Qing under the last emperor, Puyi.

Duan expelled Zhang and returned to power, yet he refused to fully reinstate constitutional constraints and parliamentary authority. This impasse created an opening for Sun Yat-sen and southern parliamentarians to mount a counterclaim to constitutional centrality. Sun traveled to Guangzhou, called on legislators to relocate south, convened an extraordinary session of the parliament, and formed a rival military government, reopening a North–South division anchored in competing claims to the republican constitution.

The political struggles linking the late Qing to the early Republic cannot be adequately understood if we only accept monocentric theories that treat the center as a single, fixed locus that is merely captured, defended, or bargained over. The Chinese case repeatedly exhibits a fourth dynamic that these traditions only partially anticipate: political actors attempted to produce centrality beyond the capital by assembling alternative centers at the periphery. This peripheral center-building becomes visible not only during the 1917 Constitutional Protection movement, but already in late Qing reforms and the 1911 Revolution itself.

Late Qing reform offers a first clue. In response to the rise of localism since late nineteenth century, the reform formally created new representative institutions and new languages of constitutionalism that enabled provincial elites articulate claims about jurisdiction, participation, and rule, but in practice it remained constrained by the court's priority of preserving the interests of Manchurian noblity and imperial household and struggled to convert provincial demands into durable, enforceable constraints on the center. This left many local elites with a narrowed channel for bringing locality to the center and heightened the appeal of extra-constitutional routes, including alliance with revolutionaries and provincial exits during crisis (Yan and Leung 2020).

The dual-center model presented by the 1911 Revolution makes it diverges from canonical narratives of the French and Russian Revolutions. Temporally, the Chinese revolutionaries moved toward regime change by establishing an alternative republican government and constitutional claim before the formal dismantling of the Qing regime, relying heavily on negotiation and coordinated pressure to secure abdication rather than only constructing a new order after the old regime collapsed (Skocpol 1979; Zarrow 2005). Spatially, the revolutionary breakthrough did not proceed primarily through an initial capture of the metropolitan center. It advanced through a cascade of provincial secessions and the reorganization of authority in provincial arenas, with the Nanjing provisional government emerging as a coordinating locus for these peripheral transformations. In other words, the revolution's early trajectory already foreshadowed a politics in which centrality could be assembled outside the capital by aggregating provincial exits into a rival claim to represent "the nation."

Yuan Shikai's consolidation efforts after 1912 can be read largely through monocentric lenses: he pursued capital-based struggles to monopolize executive authority while simultaneously weakening provincial locality by dismantling local representative institutions, tightening administrative control, and reorganizing provincial offices into more direct extensions of the center. These moves aimed to close precisely the channel that late Qing constitutionalism had partially opened: the possibility that provincial elites might constrain the center through institutionalized representation rather than through rebellion or exit. Even after Yuan's death, the underlying logic of recentralization and the struggle over constitutional centrality continued to structure Beijing politics. But the Republic's recurrent crises also made visible the limits of monocentric consolidation: when the center could not credibly coordinate coercion, extraction, and legitimacy across territory, provincial actors repeatedly faced incentives not merely to resist the center but to reconstruct it elsewhere.

The 1917 break, when Sun Yat-sen and southern allies established a rival government in Guangzhou, therefore did not come from nowhere. It replayed, at a higher institutional pitch, a pattern already present in 1911–1912: a crisis at the center, provincial leverage over coercion and finance, and a claim that constitutional legitimacy could be anchored outside the capital. The return of a dual-center configuration suggests that what was at stake was not only who ruled Beijing, but whether centrality itself could be reassembled in a different territorial location.

IMPLOSION AT BOTH NORTH AND SOUTH CENTERS (1917-1919)

A defining feature of the 1917 Constitutional Protection Movement, distinguishing it from the preceding two rounds of conflict in 1913 and 1915, was that the southern provinces established in Guangzhou a polity fully independent of Beijing, complete with both an executive government and a parliament, rather than merely a military coordinating body. In this sense, the dual-power confrontation between northern and southern regimes seen in the 1911 Revolution was reenacted.

This pattern underwent a notable change in 1918 when direct political conflict erupted between hawkish and conciliatory factions on both the northern and southern side. In the North, in May of that year, General Wu Peifu had already captured the major cities of Hunan, and his forces were pressing toward Guangdong, the headquarter of Sun Yat-sen's Constitution Protection military government in the South. At this point, however, on the one hand, Wu Peifu suddenly halted his offensive and, in June, demarcated a ceasefire line with the southern forces in

Hunan, concluding a treaty with them (China's Second Historical Archives 1979, 6:580-581). On the other hand, In the south, internecine strife within the newly established Constitutional Protection Military Government suddenly became brutal. In early January, when Generalissimo Sun Yat-sen sought to raise and train a new military force, his recruitment commissioner was arrested and executed by Mo Rongxin, the Military Governor of Guangdong. Escalating the conflict, Mo subsequently ordered the execution of officers and soldiers from the Generalissimo's personal guard. In retaliation, Sun personally commanded two naval vessels to bombard Mo's headquarters at Mount Guanyin (Luo and Huang 1994, 2: 969-973). In response, during mid-to-late January, warlords from the southwestern provinces convened the Joint Conference of Constitution-Protecting Provinces. Their objective was to push for the reorganization of the Military Government and to negotiate peace with the North (Luo and Huang 1994, 2: 973-974). In May, the southern parliament formally voted to reorganize the southern military government, replacing the system of a single commander-in-chief with a collegial system headed by seven directors, thereby effectively stripping Sun Yat-sen of his power (China's Second Historical Archives 1979, 6:772-775). Sun then decided to leave Guangzhou for Shanghai.

In 1919, after the end of the First World War, the Paris Peace Conference convened. The decision by the participating powers to transfer Germany's rights in Shandong to Japan provoked widespread anger among the Chinese populace and led to the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement (Chow 1960). Student and labor movements expanded, and the legitimacy of the Beijing government came under serious challenge (Chen 2011; Xu 2013). From February to May of that same year, the northern and southern governments also held peace talks in Shanghai, but these ultimately failed. The rise of student movement and the failure of peace negotiations provided momentum for the political realignments of 1920.

CENTER FORMATION DURING THE FEDERATION OF AUTONOMOUS PROVINCES MOVEMENT (1920-1922)

From 1917 to 1920, we can observe that the first government Sun Yat-sen established in Guangzhou suffered from a lack of state autonomy from the outset. Its orders were never effectively implemented. After armed conflict with the Guangxi army, it was further marginalized when the Guangxi clique restructured the government. Yet the reconstituted southern government also proved unable to maintain unity, and dissatisfaction with the Guangxi clique steadily increased. Sun joined forces with his supporters to establish a separate government in Shanghai, and through military action they overthrew the Guangzhou government controlled by the Guangxi clique and regained power in Guangdong. As the following analysis will show, although the second Guangzhou government acquired a certain degree of state capacity and legitimacy, its institutions still lacked the ability to withstand attempts by challengers either to subvert the center or to establish an alternative center. It therefore failed.

After the governmental reorganization, Sun was removed from the post of Grand Marshal and reassigned as one of the seven presidents, which left him marginalized within the southern government. For a time, he still sent representatives to attend meetings in order to signal southern unity. Thereafter, however, three conflicts marked the gradual fragmentation of the southern government. The first came in August 1919, when Sun formally decided to resign from the presidency and publicly denounced Cen Chunxuan, Lu Rongting, and other Guangxi militarists for controlling the southern government, bypassing parliament, and seeking a separate accommodation with the North. This prompted the parliamentary moderates to turn against the Guangxi clique and join forces with the radicals. On October 21, they passed a vote of no confidence against Cen Chunxuan, the chairman of the directorate. On October 22, Cen tendered his resignation, but the Guangxi militarists all opposed his departure, so he remained in office. The third event occurred on February 20, when the Yunnan militarist Tang Jiyao appointed the pro-Sun Yunnan commander Li Liejun to command the two Guangdong Yunnan divisions. Li Genyuan, the previous commander in chief of the Yunnan army, had been close to the Guangxi clique, and was therefore reassigned as a representative to the Reconstruction Conference, relieved of his post as commander of the Sixth National Salvation Army, and stripped of his headquarters.

After this series of events, the Guangzhou government controlled by the Guangxi clique gradually lost prestige. Sun seized this opportunity first to split the southern government once again and then to recover centrality for himself. Between March and April 1920, Wu Tingfang, president of the government and concurrently minister of foreign affairs and finance, Lin Sen and Wu Jinglian, the speakers of the two chambers of the Extraordinary Session of Parliament in Guangzhou, and most legislators all left Guangzhou for Shanghai. On May 5, the legislators in Shanghai convened the Extraordinary Session of Parliament and resolved to relocate the Constitutional Protection government to Yunnan. On June 3, the four presidents of the Constitutional Protection government, Sun Wen, Tang Jiyao, Wu Tingfang, and Tang Shaoyi, issued a declaration denying the legitimacy of the residual regime in Guangzhou. By August, acting on Sun's orders, Chen Jiongming advanced from Fujian into Guangdong and by November had expelled the Guangxi clique from the province. He was then appointed governor of Guangdong and commander in chief of the Guangdong army.

After returning to Guangzhou, Sun attempted to consolidate the centrality of his regime, but once again encountered obstruction from local elites. Beginning in December, reports indicated that Sun planned to reorganize the military government into a government of a federation of provinces, and urged parliament to convene in order to discuss the election of a president. Between January and February 1921, Wei Bangping and Chen Jiongming in Guangdong, Tang Jiyao, military governor of Yunnan, and Lin Zhiyu, governor of Hunan, all opposed the presidential election. Nevertheless, Sun still pushed parliament to pass the Outline of the Organization of the Government of the Republic of China on April 7 and to elect him president.

Yet as soon as the center had been formed, it immediately faced pressure from the periphery. This pressure took three forms: peripheral resistance to the center, peripheral remaking of the center, and the establishment of an alternative center by the periphery. The first example came on April 20, 1921, when Gu Pinzhen of Yunnan, Xiong Kewu of Sichuan, and Zhao Hengti of Hunan set conditions for recognizing Sun as president in response to Guangzhou's efforts at persuasion. They demanded that the government provide military subsidies and permit local autonomy, but the two sides failed to reach agreement. By June, interaction between the center and the periphery had shifted into a second pattern, namely the remaking of the center by the periphery. The southwestern provinces exchanged views with Sun Wen and proposed that the southern government adopt a collegial system similar to that of 1918, with several presidents. Sun Wen would serve as provisional president for dealings with foreign powers, while the other presidents would assist him. This proposal likewise failed to produce a result.

Soon afterward, two wars broke out in the South, reflecting the intensification both of the conflict between North and South and of tensions within the southern camp itself. On the one hand, with financial support from the Beijing government, the Guangxi forces under Shen Hongying invaded Guangdong, triggering the Second Guangdong Guangxi War. The war lasted until July 21, when the Guangdong army captured Guixian. In Guilin, the major Guangxi stronghold, the Guangxi commander Qin Buqu declared independence, and the Guangxi leader Lu Rongting announced his resignation by telegram. At that point, the overall outcome of the war was largely settled. In central China, meanwhile, the armies of Hunan and Sichuan attacked Hubei in the name of helping the province achieve autonomy and free itself from the control of the Beijing government. This action was not authorized by the Guangzhou government, but was instead Zhao Hengti's own decision. His intention was to capture Wuhan, the capital of Hubei, thereby gaining control of China's major transportation hub and the birthplace of the 1911 Revolution, and then to set up his own government. This was not mere speculation. After the Hubei military governor Wang Zhanyuan resigned on August 5, Zhao's ally Gu Pinzhen quickly published articles in the press advocating the establishment of a third government to replace both the northern and southern governments.

In response to the threat posed by the emergence of a new center, Sun took action on three fronts. First, the Guangzhou parliament moved quickly to convene and passed a resolution to launch the Northern Expedition toward Wuhan, thereby preventing the Hunan army from monopolizing Hubei. Second, it decided to convene a conference of the federation of provinces, scheduled for September 1, and telegraphed various provinces urging them to dispatch representatives as soon as possible, in an effort to concentrate power and coordinate action within the framework of a federation of provinces. Third, Sun publicly issued a statement opposing the third government. In the end, before Guangdong's forces could intervene, the Hunan army was defeated in Hubei, and Yueyang, a major Hunan stronghold, fell to the northern commander Wu Peifu on August 28. As Zhao Hengti made peace with Wu Peifu, the threat of a third government dissipated. Yet the Northern Expedition, which had already become an established agenda item, then generated internal conflict within Guangdong. Chen Jiongming, commander in chief of the Guangdong army, advocated troop reductions and cuts in military pay, and prioritized Guangdong's economy and people's livelihood over affairs in other provinces. Sun, by contrast, sought to seize the opportunity presented by civil war in the North, dispatch troops against provinces controlled by the northern government, and expand the influence of the southern government. This conflict ultimately led to a rupture between the two men. While Sun's own forces were advancing northward, officers under Chen launched a military coup against him and drove him out of Guangzhou.

To understand the failure of Sun Yat-sen's second Guangzhou regime, it is necessary to situate it within the broader context of the popularity of the movement for a federation of autonomous provinces in the early 1920s. Sun was able to regain power and eliminate Guangxi influence in Guangdong not only because of the military strength of the Guangdong army, but also because he could draw on the legitimacy conferred by the Monroeist principle embedded in the discourse of a federation of autonomous provinces, namely that each province should be governed by its own people. Yet the polysemy of a federation of autonomous provinces also constrained the expansion of the Guangzhou regime in two respects. First, in terms of central local relations, the provinces interpreted a federation of autonomous provinces to mean that the center was obligated to support the localities while recognizing the autonomy of provincial governments, thereby limiting central power. Second, within Guangdong itself, local elites argued that resources should be allocated primarily to the province, rather than used for outward expansion or intervention in conflicts beyond provincial borders. These two forces restricted the expansion of the Guangzhou government and also contributed to its internal fragmentation.

FROM FEDERATION TO PARTY-STATE (1923-1925)

After Sun Yat-sen was driven out of Guangzhou, he went to Shanghai, recalled the Northern Expedition forces already in the field, and contacted the Guangxi- and Yunnan-based armies that supported him, launching a two-pronged offensive against Guangdong from east and west. Chen Jiongming was defeated and withdrew to Huizhou in eastern Guangdong. On February 15, 1923, Sun returned to Guangzhou, and on March 2 he established the Headquarters of the Generalissimo of the Army and Navy there. During the following two years, he adopted a strategy different from his first two rounds of regime building in Guangzhou. He sought first to consolidate the center and only then to expand outward. By reorganizing political institutions and fiscal arrangements, and by confronting foreign powers and private armed groups, the Guangzhou government increased its state capacity during this period and laid the groundwork for the eventual displacement of the Beijing government in 1928.

More specifically, Sun carried out reforms in party organization and public finance that strengthened the southern regime's political and economic centrality. On October 25, 1923, he instructed Hu Hanmin and others to organize a Provisional Central Executive Committee of the Kuomintang, draft party statutes and a party program, register local branches, and prepare for a national meeting, a process that culminated in the First National Congress of the Kuomintang in Guangzhou from January 20 to 30, 1924. On March 5, 1924, Sun ordered the unification of Guangdong's finances and prohibited military commanders from levying miscellaneous taxes on their own authority. Although this decree had only limited immediate effects, it laid the basis for later fiscal reform. In August 1924, he further ordered the establishment of a central bank, appointing T. V. Soong (Song Ziwen) as governor and Wong Long-sang (Huang Longsheng) as deputy governor. The bank was presented as an institution through which the central government of the Republic of China would promote domestic industry, regulate finance, support the national economy, and facilitate international trade.

In military affairs, previous scholarship has generally emphasized that the establishment of the Whampoa Military Academy (Huangpu junxiao) and the acceptance of Soviet aid enabled the southern government to cultivate a large cohort of future military commanders and thereby reduce its dependence on provincial armies. Yet before the academy began to take shape in February 1924, Sun first pursued a program of troop reduction. On January 26, 1923, even before his return to Guangzhou, he issued a declaration on peaceful unification in which he proposed transforming soldiers into workers, with collective deliberation among the contending parties and public supervision by different sectors of society. In February, after assuming the post of Generalissimo, he further explained to Guangxi troops, Yunnan troops, and commercial elites that troop reduction should be linked to economic construction. On the one hand, demobilization was not simply a pacific gesture. It also aimed to cut military expenditures, improve combat effectiveness, and strengthen governmental control over the armed forces. This is clear in the concrete plan issued in March 1923, which required each army, within half a month, to submit the number of camps under its command, the location of their deployment, the names and biographies of officers, and a roster of soldiers. Inspectors sent by the Generalissimo’s headquarters were then to verify these rosters on site, while fictitious positions, the old and weak, and those without weapons were all to be eliminated.

On the other hand, troop reduction and the declaration on peaceful unification also reflected Sun's posture toward internal and external challengers. Unlike in the previous two Guangzhou regimes, this time he adopted a strategy that was conciliatory toward provinces outside Guangdong but uncompromising toward actors within Guangdong. External cooperation helped him occupy a moral high ground, since peaceful unification still appealed strongly to public opinion at the time. It also reduced the hostility of the Beijing government and neighboring provinces, thereby easing tensions both between two competing centers and between center and locality, and buying time for consolidation. Internal firmness, by contrast, allowed the southern government to acquire at least provincial centrality within Guangdong and gradually to become a sovereign claimant that had to be reckoned with.

In relations with other provinces, after taking power in March 1923 Sun long continued to advocate peaceful unification. Not until September 1924 did he convene a military conference and announce the Northern Expedition, meaning that roughly one year and seven months had elapsed. Moreover, after the northern president Cao Kun was overthrown in a coup in October, Sun did not press forward militarily. Instead, he returned to Guangzhou and in November responded to the new northern regime's proposal for peace talks, departing for Beijing, where he ultimately died. This differed sharply from the tempo of his first two Guangzhou regimes. In 1917, he became Grand Marshal in September and swore to launch the Northern Expedition in October. In 1921, he was elected president in April and announced the Northern Expedition in August. In both earlier cases he pursued the expedition until peace-oriented rivals overthrew him.

By contrast, Sun was highly resolute toward internal enemies and refused appeasement. Shen Hongying, a Guangxi militarist who had entered Guangdong during the campaign against

Chen Jiongming, rebelled on April 16, 1923, and was personally defeated by Sun's forces in June. On May 9, former subordinates of Chen Jiongming launched another rebellion in the East River region, and this challenge too was met with determined resistance, with fighting continuing into October. An even more revealing episode was the Merchants' Corps Incident (Shangtuan shijian).

In May 1924, merchant leaders in Guangzhou organized a provincial federation of merchant militia under Chen Lianbo, hoping to use commercial organization and private force to check the revolutionary regime. After the government discovered in August that the merchants had imported a large shipment of arms from Europe, it confiscated the weapons. The merchants then turned the "arms seizure" into a broader campaign of tax resistance, market closure, and anti-government agitation. British officials added pressure by warning Guangzhou against military action. Sun responded by framing the issue not simply as urban disorder but as a counterrevolutionary challenge backed by imperial interests. Although he briefly tolerated the merchants and even allowed part of the confiscated arms to be returned, the crisis climaxed on October 10, when merchant armed units opened fire on demonstrators during the Double Tenth commemoration, and on October 15 government forces crushed the Merchants' Corps in the western quarter of the city (Sun 1924; Wilbur 1985). In Reed's terms, this was a case of state by demonstration. A public emergency elicited coercive action in the name of the regime, and those actions were then interpreted as acts of the state itself (Reed 2019). The significance of the episode lies less in the defeat of one militia than in the narrowing of who could legitimately bear arms inside the revolutionary base. By suppressing a commercially financed urban corps that claimed an autonomous right to organize coercion, the Guangzhou government moved to exclude private violence from the political field and to make itself the dominant claimant to legitimate force. In this sense, the incident marked an important step toward military centrality.

A related but analytically distinct episode was the customs surplus crisis (Guanyu shijian) of late 1923. Facing acute military and fiscal pressure, the Guangzhou regime demanded that the surplus of the Guangdong Maritime Customs be retained in the South rather than remitted to Beijing. On December 1, the diplomatic body in Beijing rejected the claim, and the American minister Jacob Gould Schurman reported that the powers were prepared to use forcible measures if Sun interfered with the Maritime Customs. Gunboats were then concentrated near Guangzhou and Whampoa, while Sun answered with a declaration insisting that the customs surplus was a matter of Chinese domestic jurisdiction and that foreign powers had no right to intervene (Sun 1923; U.S. Department of State 1923; Wilbur 1985). The importance of this crisis lay not only in money, although money was central. The issue was whether Guangzhou could redirect a fiscal resource previously funneled to Beijing and deploy it for its own military and provincial purposes. More importantly, by entering into direct contention with foreign diplomats over a prerogative conventionally reserved for a recognized state, the Guangzhou regime enacted a form of external sovereignty before it fully possessed it. In Brundage's terms, this was part of the primitive accumulation of external sovereignty: foreign powers did not formally recognize Guangzhou as China's sovereign center, but they were compelled to respond to it as a claimant that had to be warned, deterred, and negotiated with (Brundage 2023). The episode thus helped convert diplomatic interaction itself into a resource for political centrality and fiscal claim making.

Although Sun Yat-sen's third Guangzhou regime still failed to resolve a number of problems, including fiscal reform and internal factional conflict, what distinguished it most clearly from his first two attempts was that it succeeded in establishing a certain degree of centrality in Guangzhou. In other words, Guangzhou became a relatively stable center. It was not only a symbol of authority, but also a nodal site through which flows of personnel, resources, and information converged, and thus an entity that all political forces were compelled to take seriously in their acts of attack, communication, cooperation, and competition. By introducing a party-state structure, Sun first promoted the stabilization of the center, thereby laying the foundation for the subsequent incorporation and transformation of peripheral forces during the expansion of the regime. To be sure, Sun did not live long enough to further consolidate this institutional arrangement, and his handling of party-communist relations and party-military relations also planted the seeds of later fragmentation.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that building a center in the periphery is a strategy available to challengers seeking to seize the national center when the old regime remains strong enough to control the center itself, yet not strong enough to control the periphery. Once challengers successfully establish a new center, however, they immediately confront the same problem as the old regime: new rivals from both the center and the localities, and in some cases foreign powers, will attempt either to capture the new center or to weaken its authority. Whether the new center can exclude or defeat its rivals more effectively than the old one will determine whether it can survive and develop. Sun Yat-sen’s three Guangzhou regimes suggest that his strategy gradually shifted from constructing a symbolic center in order to unite allies and overthrow the old center, to first building a center with relational and material centrality and only then seeking to absorb or replace the old center. Put differently, Sun’s strategy evolved from making revolution in order to build the state into building the state in order to make revolution. In Sun Yat-sen's own words, at the time in China, "there is not yet a state that could be governed; one could only speak of building the state through the party, and only after the state has been built could one proceed to govern it."

This article advances a theory of polycentric state building that builds on, and revises, Tilly's notion of multiple sovereignty. Rather than treating multiple sovereignty primarily as a revolutionary situation that culminates in the restoration or replacement of a single polity, I disaggregate it along two analytically distinct dimensions: the arena of struggle and the object of struggle (Tilly 1978). Doing so yields a sharper map of contention than the familiar axis of center versus periphery. Multiple sovereignty can take the form of direct competition at the national center, but it can also take the form of peripheral centrality building, in which contenders construct or replicate central institutions outside the capital. These two pathways differ systematically in organizational form, intensity, and temporal durability, and they generate different constraints on coalition formation and institutional design. This reframing also extends Skocpol's classic sequence. In some conjunctures, the causal order is not old state breakdown followed by mass mobilization followed by new state formation. Instead, contenders must first build a new center with sufficient coercive, extractive, and symbolic capacity before old state authority can collapse in a durable and politically consequential way (Skocpol 1979).

The theory further specifies why polycentric orders tend to be recursive. Drawing on a fractal intuition, I argue that newly constructed sovereignties reproduce the very conflicts that enabled their emergence: challengers contest centrality at the new center, local actors defend locality, and the polity remains vulnerable to renewed fission unless center building is paired with institutional arrangements that regulate state–society and center–local relations (Abbott

2001). This move shifts multiple sovereignty from an episodic descriptor of revolutionary crisis to a general framework for analyzing state construction and resistance under chronic contestation, thereby resonating with recent work on internal armed conflict and rebel governance that foregrounds rule making, compliance, and territorial authority as constitutive of political order (Kalyvas 2006; Mampilly 2011; Arjona 2016). Finally, by theorizing relations among multiple centers, the article broadens the set of possible endings beyond the usual expectation that contestation resolves either into secession or a restored monopoly. Coexisting centers may separate, one may absorb the other, or competing centers may fuse into a new center through bargaining and institutional recombination. This expanded outcome space also implies divergent governance strategies, because projects oriented toward independence, replacement, or fusion demand different modes of extraction, coalition management, and ideological legitimation (Tilly 1978; Arjona 2016).

The framework travels beyond early Republican China because peripheral center-building is not unique to China, nor to moments of outright revolution. It is most likely where sovereignty is already strained across space, where coercive and fiscal resources are territorially anchored in subnational arenas, and where challengers can plausibly claim national representation while assembling coordinating institutions outside the de jure capital (Tilly 1978; Mann 1986; Mampilly 2011). Nineteenth-century Spanish American republics, for example, repeatedly staged struggles between federalists and unitarians that were not only debates about decentralization but also contests over which provincial coalition could constitute a national center and monopolize recognition, taxation, and war making (Centeno 2002; Soifer 2015; Rock 2002). Contemporary cases likewise show that rival "national" centers can be built outside the capital or alongside it, from secessionary state-making such as South Sudan to civil wars in which competing authorities attempt to govern, extract, and speak for "the nation," as in the proliferation of rival executive and administrative structures during the Syrian conflict (Johnson 2016; Staniland 2014; Arjona 2016). Read through a polycentric lens, these episodes are not merely breakdowns of central control but attempts to reassemble centrality under fractured sovereignty, with pathways that can end in separation, annexation, or negotiated recombination.

At the same time, I do not claim that polycentric dynamics are present whenever a state is weak, nor that federalist language is inherently a program of peripheral center-making. Peripheral resistance can remain a struggle over locality without crossing the threshold into center-building, especially when challengers lack the organizational infrastructures and symbolic resources required to claim national standing, or when they can secure their aims through bargaining within a recognized constitutional order (Weber 1978; Boone 2003; Riker 1964). Nor do I argue that multiple sovereignty must culminate in national revolution in the classic sense. In some sequences, new central institutions are assembled first and only then does the old center lose its residual authority, which complicates the common temporal template in which state breakdown precedes the construction of a new state (Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1978). Finally, polycentricity does not mechanically generate endless fragmentation: recursive pressures exist, but whether they yield further fission depends on coalition structures, infrastructural constraints, and the tempo of war and bargaining, as well as the international politics of recognition and intervention (Abbott 2001; Kalyvas 2006; Coggins 2014).

These claims open several research agendas. Comparative historical work can specify when peripheral elites can credibly scale from local control to national centrality by tracing how legality, extraction, and coordination are assembled and contested across rival centers, and how different international environments tilt outcomes toward independence, fusion, or absorption

(Mann 1986; Krasner 1999; Coggins 2014). A second agenda is methodological: scholars can combine eventful process analysis with systematic measures of discursive and organizational diffusion, using media networks, reprint cascades, and elite-relational data to observe when a peripheral center-making project becomes legible as "national" rather than merely regional (Padgett and Ansell 1993; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Finally, the fractal implication of polycentric state-building suggests a broader theoretical payoff: multiple sovereignty should be treated not only as a revolutionary situation but as a recurrent problem of territorial rule, in which newly built centers must continually manage the same tensions between centrality and locality that they once exploited against an older core (Abbott 2001; Tilly 1992).