After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924 begins with the question: how was it that Chinese people stopped believing in the emperor and imagined a radically new political system? From 1885 to 1924 China underwent a period of acute political struggle and cultural change. After two thousand years of monarchical rule, Confucian political orthodoxy collapsed. The modern Chinese idea of the state was forged in four decades of struggle among competing definitions of citizenship, national identity, and republicanism. Chinese elites and commoners moved from a belief in the cosmic and charismatic role of the emperor to deep-seated skepticism. The whole cultural edifice of the imperial system declined together, including the coercive powers of the imperial court vis-à-vis local society, the civil service examination system, and the immense system of classical learning upon which the exams were based. Kang Youwei’s essays of the mid-1880s were the first writings to fundamentally challenge the traditional monarchical system by making a case for statism and offering a new vision of citizenship. The 1911 Revolution proved to be irreversible, and in 1924 the last Qing emperor was expelled from the Forbidden City. Through this lens, this book discusses a range of thinkers and political activists in a critical period of Chinese history.
This book begins with the question: how was it that Chinese people stopped believing in the emperor and imagined a radically new political system? From 1885 to 1924 China underwent a period of acute political struggle and cultural change. After two thousand years of monarchical rule, Confucian political orthodoxy collapsed. The modern Chinese idea of the state was forged in four decades of struggle among competing definitions of citizenship, national identity, and republicanism. In just two generations, Chinese elites and commoners moved from a belief in the cosmic and charismatic role of the emperor to deepseated skepticism. The traditional emperorship had affirmed moral values held by the whole community; the collapse of the monarchy was therefore a significant part of widespread cultural crisis. The whole cultural edifice of the imperial system declined together, including, first, the coercive powers of the imperial court vis-à-vis local society; second, the civil service examination system; and third, the immense system of classical learning upon which the exams were based. New and various republican ideologies were then constructed in a series of political experiments across the twentieth century.