

SELF-STRENGTHENING MOVEMENT

In the years following the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), China obtained only a temporary respite from the demands of Western imperialist powers who wanted ever-increasing commercial, diplomatic and religious privileges. As these calls reached a fever pitch in the 1850s, the Qing court was simultaneously faced with widespread internal rebellions which required the expenditure of considerable military, political, and fiscal resources. Lacking the means to combat both challenges to its authority, the Qing court acquiesced to a series of “unequal treaties” so as to more ably confront the internal threats to their rule. Even as Western military technology began to be used to suppress the Taiping and other rebellions, a small group of Chinese literati began to suggest that Western learning might be employed to address China’s domestic problems. The advocates of this “self-strengthening” were *not* wholesale advocates of Western ideas and technology, rather many of them believed they could graft the “substance” (*ti*) of Confucian culture to the “utility” (*yong*) of Western technology. Regardless, the root of Qing reform efforts emerged from the dynasty’s efforts to suppress the numerous mid-nineteenth-century rebellions.

3.9 FENG GUIFEN ON THE ADOPTION OF WESTERN LEARNING (1860)

An immensely talented scholar, **Feng Guifen** fled his hometown of Suzhou in the face of the Taiping Army and sought refuge in Shanghai. By this time Shanghai had become the metropolitan base for Western interests in China. Although he remained there for

ANDIJAN—Located in the Central Asian Republic of Uzbekistan, roughly half way between Kashgar and Kokand.

KASHGAR—Located in the modern autonomous region of Xinjiang in western China, Kashgar was the meeting point between two trading routes around the Taklamakan Desert. Today, it remains populated by Uigur, Kazak and Uzbek peoples.

FENG GUIFEN (1809–1874)—A precociously bright scholar, he achieved his jinshi degree at the age of 32 and was immediately appointed to the prestigious Hanlin Academy. A reformer who advocated using Western methods within a Chinese context, he is best known for championing a school to teach Western languages and sciences.

less than a year, Feng became familiar with Western political theory and began to contemplate how such theories might be adapted to aid China in suppressing the domestic threats it faced. The following document is part of Feng's forty *Essays of Protest* initially written during his time in Shanghai and then circulated among influential scholar-officials of the day. They delineate specific reforms he felt the Qing dynasty should implement in order to gain greater internal control and international stature.

Questions

1. Why would Feng Guifen's proposals seem radical to the more conventional minds of mid-nineteenth-century China?
2. What areas of China's domestic political scene does Feng hope to improve with his proposal?

Currently those who are aware of Western affairs are called *tongshi* [translator]. All are people who engage in trivial affairs, and are not valued by the community. Simply looking for a way to feed and clothe themselves they begin to work for Westerners. Their character is rough and shallow, their intentions despicable. All they lust for is profit. In addition their knowledge of Western languages is limited mostly to merchandise, commerce and slang. How could they be expected to pay attention to scholarly topics? Since there was a need, we established special schools to enroll children from poor families to study both Chinese and Western languages. However, most of those village children are misbehaved and not very intelligent (for several decades I have even tried to find smart students from my own villages and found none). Even worse, they slowly adopted the bad habits of Westerners. What we achieved is no better than previous ones.

If we want to use Western learning, it is necessary to create translation academies at Guangdong and Shanghai. We should select gifted children younger than fifteen-years-old from the nearby areas and offer them a small living allowance along with room and board. Westerners from a variety of countries should be hired to teach their spoken and written languages. Famous scholars from within China should be hired to teach the classics, history, and other subjects. The students should at the same time be taught mathematics. (All Western learning derives from mathematics).

[...]

After three years, all those students who can smoothly read and recite foreign books should be

licensed. The especially gifted students who practically apply their learning should be recommended by the Minister of Trade to receive the *juren* degree as a reward. As I previously indicated, China has many talented minds. Certainly, there are those who having learned from Westerners can surpass them. One of the main responsibilities of government is education.

[...]

Since the expansion of trade over the past 20 years, many foreigners have learned our language and studied our literature. Some of them can even read our classics and history, recognize our statutes and administration, and know our geography and customs. Our officials under the rank of Military Commander (*duhu*) level know nothing about other countries. By comparison should we not be ashamed? As a result, we have to rely on dull-witted translators to communicate. The tone and basic meaning were transmitted, much of the original significance is lacking—and many small inaccuracies have caused big disputes. I lament the fact that our foreign affairs, the key concern for our government, are dependent upon such people. No wonder, we do not understand each other thoroughly, and cannot distinguish the truth from lies. Negotiations for peace or war are carried out without fully understanding the matters at hand. These unresolved issues are our country's unseen peril. If this proposal is implemented, if many more people study foreign languages surely many more people with high standards and character will appear among them. Afterwards, we will understand the crucial elements of our foreign policy and manage them more appropriately.

3.11 LI HONGZHANG'S MEMORIAL ADVOCATING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRAINING (1863)

Grand statesman of the late Qing period, **Li Hongzhang** (1823–1901) came to prominence under Zeng Guofan as a commanding officer in the Hunan Army. Shortly thereafter he organized a separate Huai Army utilizing the same model of organization in the neighboring Anhui province to combat the Nian and Taiping rebel forces in the region. During the 1860s he came into substantial contact with Western military advisors (notably, **Charles “Chinese” Gordon**). As a result of these associations, Li Hongzhang became increasingly convinced of China’s need to adopt Western technology. A major force in the Self-Strengthening movement, Li oversaw the building of military academies and naval bases and was an important proponent of other progressive reforms. In the following proposal to the emperor, Li Hongzhang discusses his efforts to build up a body of able translators through a network of translator schools similar to those proposed by Feng Guifen several years earlier.

Questions

1. What rationale does **Li Hongzhang** offer for the creation of the **Tongwen Guan**?
2. Does **Li Hongzhang** envision the students of the **Tongwen Guan** being different from those who are taking the imperial civil service exams?

LI HONGZHANG (1823-1901)—A major figure in the Self-Strengthening Movement, Li Hongzhang rose to prominence under the tutelage of Zeng Guofan and commanded the Anhui (Huai) Army. In the 1870s he promoted the adoption of Western technology such as railways and arsenals as well as Western-style education. In the last decades of his life Li Hongzhang became the Qing empire’s preeminent (if underappreciated) diplomat.

CHARLES “CHINESE” GORDON (1835–1885)—A British officer serving in China during the Taiping Rebellion. He initially fought with British forces, then was appointed to head a joint force of Europeans and Asians known as the “Ever Victorious Army.”

In China's contacts with foreigners, we must first of all comprehend their ambitions, be aware of their desires, and have a thorough knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, of where they are sincere and where they dissemble, before we can expect to be treated equitably. During the past twenty years of trade relations, quite a few of their leaders have learned our language, ... but among our officials and gentry only a very small number understand foreign languages. All the foreign countries have one of two interpreters at Shanghai, and whenever there are discussions between Chinese and foreign high officials, we depend on these foreign interpreters to transmit the discussions. It is difficult to guarantee that there are no biases or misinterpretations

[...]

Your minister requests that, following the example of the Tongwen Guan, we establish an additional foreign language school at Shanghai, select bright,

upright, and quiet youngsters fourteen years of age or under from the vicinity, invite Westerners to teach them [foreign languages] and *juren* [civil degree holders] and licentiates of superior character and learning to teach them the classics, history, and literature. After completing their studies, they should be sent to the Governor-General and Governor of their home provinces and examined to be made supplementary district licentiates. ... In three to five years, after we have these educated men skilled in foreign languages, an interpreter should be added to the yamens of all Governors and Governors-General who deal with foreign trade and to the Superintendent of Maritime Customs to handle foreign affairs. ... Chinese wisdom and intelligence are hardly inferior to those of the Westerners. If we attain mastery of Western languages, and then teach them to one another, a thorough understanding of all their clever techniques of steamships and firearms can gradually be attained in China.

3.12 WOREN'S MEMORIAL OBJECTING TO WESTERN LEARNING (1867)

In 1862, the Qing court founded the Tongwen Guan (Foreign Languages College), the first imperially sponsored institution of Western learning. Originally designed to teach Western languages as subjects, the school quickly added courses in geometry, chemistry, law, physics, economics, and astronomy to their multi-year program. It quickly became a flashpoint between conservative and liberal officials. The conservatives, led by Woren, the powerful head of the Grand Secretary, vigorously opposed such a Westernized focus. The following document is significant as a reminder that while the mid-nineteenth century marked a period of reform, traditionalists remained hostile to Western subjects, believing they undermined the classical teachings that formed the basis of imperial China's culture and society.

Questions

1. Is Woren objecting to the subjects taught or is he objecting that they are from the West?
2. Is Woren's primary point, that Westerners in China have done more harm than good, a valid one in the 1867 context?

TONGWEN GUAN (Foreign Languages College)—Founded in 1862 to systematically begin foreign language instruction under government oversight, the college taught English, French, German, Russian and Japanese as well as courses in science, philosophy and international law. In 1902 it was consolidated into the Imperial University (which later became Beijing University).

WOREN (1804–1871)—A powerful Qing official who served as head of the influential Hanlin Academy. Woren espoused strong Neo-Confucian views and vigorously opposed the westernized curriculum advocated by the Self-Strengthening Movement.

In his petition Censor Zhang Shengzao maintains that the government has no need whatever to recruit successful candidates in the civil service examinations to learn about mathematics and astronomy. However, in a decree issued by Your Majesty it is stated that the government-operated Tongwen Guan should in fact recruit these candidates to study these two subjects on the grounds that the subjects are more than technical in nature and are thus not entirely beneath a gentleman's serious concern and that in the pursuit of knowledge a Confucian scholar should not concentrate on one field to the exclusion of all others.

Your Majesty is certainly correct when you say that mathematics, being one of the Six Arts, is a legitimate field of study and should by no means be confused with heretical or unorthodox learning. However, as your humble servant sees it, whatever small advantage can be derived from studying mathematics and astronomy is more than offset by the great harm that would certainly come about when we have to employ Westerners to teach them. In the opinion of your humble servant, we should certainly study this project more carefully before carrying it out. Let me elaborate on this point.

Your humble servant has heard that the foundation of a nation lies in the virtues (such as righteousness and propriety) she possesses rather than in transient advantages she may have or fanciful expedients she can devise. Her true strength is derived from the collective mind of her citizens rather than some unusual skills she happens to possess. Now we are asked not only to pursue a small, an insignificant skill but also honor foreigners as teachers. Since foreigners are known for their treachery, it is extremely doubtful if they will reveal to us all of their secrets. Even if they did, their contribution would amount to no more than the training of technicians. Throughout history no country has ever become strong by relying on achievement in technology.

Being so large, China has many talented men within her national boundaries. If, say, such subjects as mathematics and astronomy are really important enough to be taught, we can certainly find, if our search is wide and intense enough, Chinese experts to teach them. Why do we have to employ foreigners? Why do we have to honor them as our teachers?

Moreover, foreigners have always been our enemies. In the tenth year of Xianfeng (1860), they launched a vicious attack against China without any

provocation. They ravaged our capital, thus shaking the nation to its very foundation. They not only set fire to the [Yuanming Yuan] and destroyed it but also indiscriminately murdered civilians and officials alike. This humiliation was unprecedented in the 200-year history of our dynasty and has been deeply resented by both scholars and officials. Though the government was then forced to negotiate peace with these foreigners, how can it ever forget the unavenged shame? Since the conclusion of the peace treaty, Christianity has spread far and wide and with great cunning has beguiled and entrapped many innocent but ignorant citizens. In these critical times the only thing the nation can rely on for its survival is the rectitude of its intelligentsia, who, we hope, can continue to maintain people's integrity by pointing out to them the correct path to follow. Now that we are asked to transform our most talented young men, upon whom the future of our nation relies, into the followers of foreign ways, not only will the best of our tradition suffer regression, but the unorthodox, alien spirit will continue to spread. If this situation continues, I am afraid that in a few years all of us will become foreigners instead of remaining Chinese.

Your humble servant has had the occasion of reading the collected works of the late Emperor Shengzu Ren [Kangxi]. In a decree issued to the Grand Chancellor and the Nine Ministers, he said that China would suffer at the hands of Western powers for several hundred years. How farsighted he was! Though he adopted foreign ways for his own purpose, deep in his heart he never trusted foreigners. In view of the fact that China has suffered greatly at the hands of foreigners for such a long time, why should we insist on spreading their evil ideas? I have heard that foreign missionaries often resent the fact that Chinese intellectuals do not wish to learn about their religion. If we allow successful examination candidates to learn from these people, they will be deluded and led astray by this alien religion before they can learn anything really useful. This is a trap the foreigners have carefully set up: by no means should we fall into it!

It is the hope of your humble servant that Your Majesty, by invoking the power you alone possess, will immediately put an end to the proposal in question, so that the hidden danger contained in it will be eliminated before it can emerge and the future of the nation will remain orthodox and safe. This action on your part will bring great benefit to the nation as a whole.