

HUNDRED-DAYS REFORM MOVEMENT

1898 was a tumultuous year in a chaotic era. In the wake of the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), a group of liberal advisors and confidantes (the so-called “Emperor’s clique” [*didang*]) wielded increasing influence over the young Guangxu emperor. Among this group, **Kang Youwei**, a pro-reformist scholar, became particularly influential. Seeking

GUANGXU (1871–1908)—The ninth emperor of China, selected at the age of four by his aunt Cixi. He initiated the Hundred Days’ Reform of 1898, which was abruptly halted by Cixi who stripped him of all power, privileges and honors. He died on November 14, 1908, a day before Cixi.

EIGHT-NATION FOREIGN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE—An alliance of eight nations (Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States) who came together to quell the Boxer Rebellion.

NEW POLICIES (1901–1910)—A series of political reforms set in motion by Cixi in an effort to erect a modern administrative bureaucracy.

PUYI (1905–1967)—More formally known as the Xuantong emperor, he was the tenth and last emperor of the Qing dynasty. He became emperor at the age of three, abdicated at the age of 7 in 1912, and was the titular head of Manchukuo, the Japanese puppet state in northeastern China at the age of 27 in 1932.

KANG YOUWEI (1858–1927)—A prominent late-Qing classically trained scholar who advocated modernization and reform within a Confucian framework. His influence peaked during the Hundred Days of Reform when the Guangxu emperor selected his proposals as the framework for reforms. He was forced to flee China when Dowager Empress Cixi abruptly seized power and executed Kang Youwei’s younger brother and five other top reformers.

to capitalize on the growing popular discontent over the Treaty of Shimonoseki and on the rising resentment resulting from concessions given to the Western powers, Kang Youwei flooded the emperor and other high officials with calls for urgent reforms (5.1). In the period between June 11 and September 21, 1898 (now known as the “**Hundred Days Reform Movement**”), the Guangxu emperor issued, in quick succession, a series of edicts that attempted to usher in an unparalleled era of reform. The response from the Dowager Empress Cixi and her more conservative allies was swift. Six officials were hastily executed, and Kang Youwei fled China to pursue his reformist ideals amongst the vast (and quite wealthy) Chinese overseas population.

5.1 KANG YOUWEI'S MEMORIAL ON INSTITUTIONAL REFORM (JANUARY 29, 1898)

The following document was Kang Youwei's sixth memorial to the emperor urging major institutional changes. Despite the influence he ultimately attained, Kang Youwei did not have an audience with the emperor for almost six months after writing this memorial, nor would his recommendations take the shape of an imperial edict until June 1898. Kang Youwei's intellectual make-up, though perhaps staid by modern standards, was typical for the scholar-official reformers of the day. His logic and reasoning (using past historical examples and Chinese classics to support his views) reflect the reformers' classical orientation. Despite the traditional veneer, Kang Youwei's reforms sought to alter the foundation of Chinese society. Kang Youwei should still be seen as a moderate pursuing the middle ground. He championed reforms that fell between the conservative traditionalists who sought to preserve a traditional interpretation of the Confucian classics and the revolutionaries who advocated ending the examination system, modernization of the police and military, and creation of new institutions to modernize China.

Questions

1. What reasons does Kang suggest hinder China's reform? How does he suggest the emperor resolve these problems?
2. Does Kang favor or resist “Western” reform?

A survey of all states in the world will show that those states which undertook reforms became strong while those states which clung to the past perished. The consequences of clinging to the past and the effects of opening up new ways are thus obvious. If Your Majesty, with your discerning brilliance, observes the trends in other countries, you will see that if we can change, we can preserve ourselves; but if we cannot change, we shall perish. Indeed, if we can make a complete change, we shall become strong, but if we only make limited

changes, we shall still perish. If Your Majesty and his ministers investigate the source of the disease, you will know that this is the right prescription.

Our present trouble lies in our clinging to old institutions without knowing how to change. In an age of competition between states, to put into effect methods appropriate to an era of universal unification and laissez-faire is like wearing heavy furs in summer or riding a high carriage across a river. This can only result in having a fever or getting oneself drowned.

HUNDRED DAYS REFORM MOVEMENT (1898)—A period that lasted from June 11 to September 21, 1898 when the Guangxu emperor, on advice from Kang Youwei and other top reformers, issued a series of decrees instituting far-reaching reforms. The reform movement ended when Cixi, Dowager Empress, staged a coup, executed several reformers, and effectively removed the emperor from power.

It is a principle of things that the new is strong but the old weak; that new things are fresh but old things rotten; that new things are active but old things static. If the institutions are old, defects will develop. Therefore there are no institutions that should remain unchanged for a hundred years. Moreover, our present institutions are but unworthy vestiges of the Han, Tang, Yuan, and Ming dynasties; they are not even the institutions of the [Manchu] ancestors. In fact, they are the products of the fancy writing and corrupt dealing of the petty officials rather than the original ideas of the ancestors. To say that they are the ancestral institutions is an insult to the ancestors. Furthermore, institutions are for the purpose of preserving one's territories. Now that the ancestral territory cannot be preserved, what good is it to maintain the ancestral institutions? ...

Although there is a desire for reform, yet if the national policy is not fixed and public opinion not united, it will be impossible for us to give up the old and adopt the new. The national policy is to the state just as the rudder is to the boat or the pointer is to the compass. It determines the direction of the state and shapes the public opinion of the country.

Nowadays the court has been undertaking some reforms, but the action of the emperor is obstructed by the ministers, and the recommendations of the able scholars are attacked by old-fashioned bureaucrats. If the charge is not "using barbarian ways to change China," then it is "upsetting the ancestral institutions." Rumors and scandals are rampant, and people fight each other like fire and water. A reform in this way is as ineffective as attempting a forward march by walking backward. It will inevitably result

in failure. Your Majesty knows that under the present circumstances reforms are imperative and old institutions must be abolished. I beg Your Majesty to make up your mind and to decide on the national policy. After the fundamental policy is determined, the methods of implementation must vary according to what is primary and what is secondary, what is important and what is insignificant, what is strong and what is weak, what is urgent and what can wait. ... If anything goes wrong, no success can be achieved.

After studying ancient and modern institutions, Chinese and foreign, I have found that the institutions of the sage-kings and Three Dynasties [of Xia, Shang, and Zhou] were excellent, but that ancient times were different from today. I hope Your Majesty will daily read Mencius and follow his example of loving the people. The development of the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties may be learned, but it should be remembered that the age of universal unification is different from that of sovereign nations. I wish Your Majesty would study Guan Zi and follow his idea of managing the country. As to the republican governments of the United States and France and the constitutional governments of Britain and Germany, these countries are far away and their customs are different from ours. Their changes occurred a long time ago and can no longer be traced. Consequently I beg Your Majesty to adopt the purpose of Peter the Great of Russia as our purpose and to take the Meiji Reform of Japan as the model of our reform. The time and place of Japan's reform are not remote and her religion and customs are somewhat similar to ours. Her success is manifest; her example can be followed.

5.2 EXAMINATION SYSTEM AS AN OBSTRUCTION TO REFORM (AUGUST 23, 1898)

No reform struck at the heart of traditional Chinese culture (let alone Qing bureaucracy) more than the attempt to overhaul China's examination system as the primary method of selecting its civil officials. It is difficult for us in the modern era to understand how these exams were intertwined with Chinese society. Officials were selected by it; the entire education system revolved around it; and many believed the culture's whole moral make-up was shaped by it. To reformers the exams became the cause of everything that kept China from modernizing. For conservatives the exam structure defined the very bonds that held Chinese society together. The exam topics themselves had been slowly modernized so that by the end of the nineteenth century, questions on issues of reform and modernization were included. However, many traditional elements such as the need to adhere to a strict rhyme scheme, rigid format, and calligraphy remained. The question of how to refine the exam system does, on many levels, reflect the tensions throughout Chinese society at the turn of the century.

Questions

1. What negative attributes does the author see in the exam system?
2. What positive elements might a conservative official use to counter such an argument?

The dynasty's examination system is extremely annoying and cumbersome. From the district examinations to the two Palace Examinations, there is not a single year without exams of some sort, and not one exam without a preliminary test, in order to prevent cheating and to stress recruiting men of talent. In the district and prefectural examinations there are at least four or five sessions, and as many as six or seven. And in addition, there are three or four sessions of examinations supervised by the Provincial Commissioner of Education. Students go through innumerable hardships before they can obtain the right to wear the robes designating them as officially authorized students. Hence, year after year they persist in their studies until their hair turns white. One half of each year is taken up with examinations, and the other half is burdened with wife, children, home and family. Any spare time is spent trying to master the eight-legged essay style. And yet, it still is very difficult to attain satisfactory competence in the eight-legged style, even though it is considered so vital, and pursued month after month and year after year. What then, if in addition, one wants to read useful books and study useful subjects?

The Palace Examinations rely solely upon ability in fine script [*xiaokai*], poetry, and rhyme-prose, not at all what the candidates are used to studying. [Even] members of the Hanlin Academy do not dare to discard the eight-legged style, poetry, rhyme-prose, and fine script before attaining the Third Rank, because they want to pass the test for Supervisor of Imperial Instruction. This is all because the difference between passing and failing the examinations depends on abilities in these areas. Hence, though after entering officialdom and becoming officials in the provinces for five or ten years scholars may gain some experience and some knowledge and understanding, it is easy to be infected by the heavy-laden atmosphere of officialdom, and the desire for personal gain is apt to affect the mind. As for Hanlin and other metropolitan officials, they are

busily occupied with writing poetry, rhyme-prose, and fine script. And what is even more ridiculous, they spend their days going to the residences of fellow graduates of the same year, with a volume in hand, earnestly encouraging each other at their group study, just like in their *xiucai* days. Alas, are they this vulgar? Nevertheless, since those above recruit and select this way, those below respond accordingly. This is a circumstance about which aspiring scholars can do nothing. . . .

For the court to use poetry, rhyme-prose, and fine script as the criteria for passing or failing the examinations for men of ability is truly vulgar and ridiculous. Now, if peace reigned throughout the empire, and the court had no problems on its hands, then it would be proper for officials in the Hanlin Academy to serve His Majesty by lauding peace and plentitude through these means. But the multitude of problems on the coast has steadily weakened the nation. Poetry and rhyme-prose are not adequate to cope with this changing situation, and fine script is not adequate to withstand the enemy. How are we to devise a policy to bring peace and to emulate the wealth and power [of Western nations]? Every meaningless and extravagant custom should be reformed, one after another—the strings must be changed, and then tightened up. Only then will officials of the court and members of the Hanlin Academy, as well as scholars outside officialdom, be able to devote themselves to useful studies. Their ambitions will no longer be diverted by eight-legged essays, poetry, rhyme-prose, and fine script, nor will their minds be disturbed by all the various examinations. Who but a sagacious sovereign could thus respond to the times with the appropriate measures, and reform anachronistic laws? Nevertheless, scholars fortunate enough to have been born in an age when men of ability are sought out and rewarded, and incentives are given for practical learning, but who still fail to exert themselves to be of use and to respond to the generous intentions of the court, should feel ashamed of themselves, should they not?