

New Tensions in the Late Qing

10.1 SUN YAT-SEN'S REFORM PROPOSAL TO LI HONGZHANG, 1893

Before Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) started his career as a revolutionary, he traveled north to Tianjin to seek an audience with Li Hongzhang. He hoped to enlist Li's support for a set of principles for the reform of China. Sun had no influential friends in the north to facilitate an introduction to Li, however, and he was unable to meet with the august former leader of the Huai Army or to feel certain that his letter to Li had received any serious attention. Unlike his fellow Cantonese Yung Wing (Rong Hong), Sun was never permitted to use his knowledge of the West on the behalf of the Qing state. He left north China feeling alienated and ready for other political paths.

The reform proposals that Sun drew up in 1894 resembled plans proposed by a number of his contemporaries who, like Sun, were trained in the West and heavily influenced by foreign educational or political models. It is worth noting that this 1894 plan for reform was more moderate than those being proposed by radical reformers in the state bureaucracy, a faction led by Kang Yuwei and Liang Qichao, who saw the need for large-scale constitutional and institutional reforms.

Though my family originated in eastern Guangdong, it has lived for generations in Xiangshan.¹ Having been educated as a British physician in Hong Kong and having in fact travelled abroad during my younger days, I am more

1. Since 1928 the county has been renamed Zhongshan Xian to commemorate Sun Yat-sen.

than familiar with the languages, political institutions, and customs of the Western countries, as well as the natural and applied sciences. As I have paid particular attention to the way in which these Western countries strengthen themselves economically and militarily and the method whereby they refine their customs, I believe that I understand the causes of the constant shift of current events, as well as the rules and laws that govern international relations. Today people from all parts of China, being more informed than they used to be, have come to the capital to present proposals on national affairs. Meanwhile the government is doing its utmost to bring about a most efficient administration and tirelessly pursues such policies as those that will bring maximum benefit to the nation. As the future of our nation brightens, I myself have often thought of presenting my views to the attention of the authorities, hoping that some of these views may be judged good enough to be adopted. Until now I have not ventured to make such a presentation, knowing in advance that from a man of unknown reputation or prestige, my voice would be too feeble to be heard.

Now that the nation is sparing no effort to make itself wealthy and strong, it will not be long before we can march side by side with Europe in terms of achievement. We have in our possession all modern inventions, such as steamships, locomotives, telegraph, and firearms, which the Westerners have used so effectively in the past to advance their interest at our expense. As new programs continue to be introduced, the authorities of our government will acquire the means of not only bringing about peace at home and resisting aggression from abroad but also putting into practice the long-range plan of enriching our nation and strengthening its armed forces. Besides, we know in advance each move foreign countries might choose to make, since we have envoys stationed abroad. How fortunate it is for an insignificant person like me to live in such a great age as this! How impudent I would appear to be if I venture to present some of my own ideas! However, there are things about which I have thought a great deal and wish to speak. Taking advantage of this opportune moment when China enjoys the brightest prospect for the future, I shall present my thoughts, however insignificant for Your Excellency's kind consideration.

I have always felt that the real reason for Europe's wealth and power lies less in the superiority of its military might than in the fact that in Europe every man can fully develop his talent, land resources are totally utilized, each object functions to its maximum capacity, and every item of merchandise circulates freely. The full development of personal talent, the total utilization of land resources, the functioning of each object to its maximum capacity, and the free circulation of merchandise—these four items are the most basic if our nation is to become wealthy, strong, and well governed. For our nation to ignore these four items while concerning itself exclusively with ships and guns is to seek the insignificant at the expense of the basic....

.... As man continues to search for laws that govern objects and things, the utility of these laws to his well-being will become greater and greater. Among

his new discoveries none is more awe-inspiring than electricity. Electricity has neither form nor substance; it is an object and yet it is not. It exists in every object, circulates freely in the universe, and provides more and wider utility to man than anything else. It can be used for illumination or communication; it can be used for turning motors, preserving food, or opening mines. The use of electricity for illumination or communication has been a wide practice for some time, but its use for turning motors will be found in the mines for the extraction of ores. As scientists continue their research, we shall not be surprised if electricity is also used for the growth of plants, including food crops.

All this shows that the future of man is determined by man, and not by nature. Electricity, until very recently, has been generated exclusively by burning coal. Now some scientists have devised a new method; the generation of electricity by waterfalls. Furthermore, the electricity thus generated can be preserved, to be used whenever and wherever it is needed. This is another way of saying that the supply of electricity is nearly inexhaustible, no matter how much man uses it. As machines gradually replace the physical strength of man, a point will be eventually reached when all that man has to do is to use his brain, leaving all the physical work to the machines. This is not idle speculation; it will soon become a reality.

As machines become more and more intricate and their applications become wider and wider, industries of all kinds will mushroom across each of the industrialized countries. They provide not only what the government, especially its military establishment, needs but also what the people want, especially the daily necessities. Machines can produce more efficiently and at a smaller cost, as compared to a situation without them. Besides, they can do kinds of work not performed by human labor. They can be used to pulverize huge rocks for the extraction of minerals, to drill wells to such a depth as hitherto unimaginable, and to spin and weave at such a lightning speed that they can complete in an hour what a thousand workers cannot do in a day. When machines are used to spin and weave silk dregs or woolen waste, they are performing a miracle by transforming unusable materials to useful products. The kinds of work they can do are too numerous to be cited one by one.

China's territory is large and her natural resources are broad and varied. If we can promote the use of machinery on a nationwide scale, the benefit to the people will be enormous. As long as machinery is not used, our natural resources will remain hidden, and our people will continue to be poor. For all of us who want our nation to become wealthy and strong, the choice is rather obvious . . .

It has been thirty years since we began to imitate the West. We have language schools, as well as military and naval academies, to train specialists in Western affairs. We have mining and textile enterprises to open up financial resources. We have steamship and railroad companies to facilitate transportation. Yet we still lag behind Europe in overall achievement. Why? The reason is that we

have not, really, embarked upon the completion of the four tasks, as described above, on a nationwide basis. When we do, given China's human and natural resources, we should be able to overtake Europe in twenty years.

Look at Japan. She opened her country for Western trade later than we did, and her imitation of the West also came later. Yet only in a short period her success in strengthening herself has been enormously impressive. She succeeds because she has been able to proceed with the four tasks, as described above, on a nationwide basis, with no opposition to speak of. There is no such thing as an impossible task—a so-called impossible task will become possible if there are enough dedicated people to perform it. The difficulty with China is not only the lack of enough dedicated people to perform but also the ignorance of too many people on the importance of performance. Had our difficulty been the former and nothing else, we could certainly hire foreigners to perform for us. Unfortunately, our real difficulty has been the latter, namely, the ignorance of too many people on the importance of performance. Had there been foreigners able and willing to work for us, the ignorant among us would obstruct and sabotage and make sure that these foreigners could not succeed. Here lies the real reason why we have not accomplished much; public opinion and entrenched ideas simply will not allow it.

For four decades Your Excellency has argued vigorously and toiled tirelessly for the building of a modern navy and the construction of railroads. Despite this valiant effort, our naval force remains the Beiyang Fleet and the railroad that has been constructed so far is the Tientsin-Shanhaiguan line. If a man like Your Excellency, who enjoys unqualified support from His Imperial Majesty and enormous popularity among his colleagues, has to encounter so many difficulties in modernizing China, we can easily imagine the kind of obstruction others have to face if they try to achieve the same. Even if Yao and Shun were living today, they would not be able to do much. That is why so many patriots have become dispirited and lost hope; that is why I myself have abandoned my own specialty to seek anonymity in medicine.

Since the Restoration Your Excellency has been most concerned with the cultivation of talent. Schools have been established to enroll young men of promise, and Western specialists have been invited to teach them. Large sums of money have been spent on education; a man of talent or skill, whenever he is found, is cherished like a newly discovered gem. Your Excellency must be highly commended for placing the cultivation of talent as the first priority of the nation. It is my misfortune that so far I have not had the privilege of making Your Excellency's acquaintance.

I was born twenty-seven years ago and have studied uninterruptedly since childhood. Though I have not been able to compose the eight-legged essays² to

2. During the Ming-Qing period the eight-legged style (*pa-ku*) was the standard form for examination essays.

pass the civil service examination or write in such a way as to distinguish myself among the literati, I am more than familiar with the works of our ancient sages, the art of good government, and the principle whereby the livelihood of our people can be improved. Besides, I have studied Western subjects and have been more than proficient in one particular discipline [medicine]. Knowing that Your Excellency is interested in the cultivation of talent and the employment of talent whenever one is found, I would like to enlist myself as one of the candidates, at a time when all men of conscience must rise to meet the urgent challenge of our time. . . .