LATE QING REFORMS

The following is a collection of three sources from the reform movements in the late Qing. Please read them carefully and answer the questions listed below in proper essay format.

EXCERPTS FROM REFORMING MEN’S MINDS COMES BEFORE REFORMING INSTITUTIONS

By Chu Chengbo

Introduction

Qing scholars and officials of the late nineteenth century were very concerned with the empire’s weakness, which was there for all to see as the Qing experienced defeat at the hands of the British, the French, and, in 1895, the former tributary country of Japan. Concern with weakness led scholars and officials to offer a number of different analyses of the causes of weakness and to propose a variety of actions meant to address those problems.

Chu Chengbo, an imperial official, submitted the following memorial to the Guangxu emperor (1871-1908, r. 1875-1908) in the wake of Japan’s defeat of the Qing in 1895.

At the beginning of the Tongzhi reign (1862-1874), Zeng Guofan, Zuo Zongtang, Shen Baozhen, Li Hongzhang, and others, because the danger from abroad was becoming daily more serious, strongly emphasized Western learning. In order to effect large-scale manufacture, they built shipyards and machine factories … Truly no effort was spared in the attempt to establish new institutions after the pattern of the West…

… perfunctory execution of these reforms brought us to the point now where the island barbarians [the Japanese] have suddenly invaded us, and the whole situation of the nation has deteriorated. Was it because there were no reforms or because the reforms were no good? The real mistake was that we did not secure the right men to manage the new institutions…

If we secure the right persons, all things can be transformed without a trace; but if we do not obtain the right persons, laws and institutions will only serve the nefarious designs of the wicked.


EXCERPTS FROM A COMPREHENSIVE CONSIDERATIONS OF THE WHOLE SITUATION

By Kang Youwei

Introduction

Kang Youwei (1858-1927) was a scholar and official educated in both the Confucian classics and in Western history and philosophy. Typical of scholars of his generation, Kang was concerned about the weakness of the Qing and devoted himself to the problem of how to make the country rich, strong, and able to stand up to the constant pressure and challenges posed by the Western powers and Japan.

On January 29, 1898, Kang submitted this memorial entitled “Comprehensive Consideration of the Whole Situation” to the Guangxu emperor (1871-1908, r. 1875-1908). A few months later, the Guangxu emperor put Kang in charge of implementing a program of government reform. The project lasted only 100 days before court factions opposed to Kang inspired the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) to oust Kang and his colleagues (many of whom were executed) and to put the Guangxu emperor under what amounted to house arrest for the rest of his life.

A survey of all the states in the world will show that those states that undertook reforms became strong while those states that clung to the past perished…
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…

It is a principle of things that the new is strong but the old is weak. … Moreover, our present institutions are but the unworthy vestiges of the Han, Tang, Yuan, and Ming dynasties … In fact, they are the products of the fancy writing and corrupt dealing of petty officials rather than the original ideas of the ancestors.

After studying ancient and modern institutions, Chinese and foreign, I have found that the institutions of the sage kings and the Three Dynasties [of Xia, Shang, and Zhou] were excellent, but that ancient times were different from today…

… 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 for our reform.


REFORM EDICT OF THE QING IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT
(JANUARY 29, 1901)

Introduction
In the wake of the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901) and the catastrophic foreign intervention that that movement precipitated, the imperial government reconsidered the need for fundamental reforms. Government reform had already been attempted, and rejected, in 1898 when Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and his colleagues temporarily ran the imperial government, with the support of the Guangxu Emperor (1871-1908, r. 1875-1908), until the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) ousted them.

A mere three years later, however, the Empress Dowager issued the edict below.

Certain principles of morality (changqing) are immutable, whereas methods of governance (zhifa) have always been mutable. The Classic of Changes states that “when a measure has lost effective force, the time has come to change it.” And the Analects states that “the Shang and Zhou dynasties took away from and added to the regulations of their predecessors, as can readily be known.”…

We have now received Her Majesty’s decree to devote ourselves fully to China’s revitalization, to suppress vigorously the use of the terms new and old, and to blend together the best of what is Chinese and what is foreign. The root of China’s weakness lies in harmful habits too firmly entrenched, in rules and regulations too minutely drawn, in the overabundance of inept and mediocre officials and in the paucity of truly outstanding ones, in petty bureaucrats who hide behind the written word and in clerks and yamen 邮门 (衙門) runners who use the written word as talismans to acquire personal fortunes, in the mountains of correspondence between government offices that have no relationship to reality, and in the seniority system and associated practices that block the way of men of real talent…

The first essential, even more important than devising new systems of governance (zhifa) is to secure men who govern well (zhi ren). Without new systems, the corrupted old system cannot be salvaged; without men of ability, even good systems cannot be made to succeed.

Questions:

1. What reasons does Chu Chengbo suggest for the Qing’s weakness vis-à-vis the Western powers and Japan?

2. What is Chu’s position with regard to reform efforts such as those of Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang (i.e., the construction of modern, Western-style armories, military forces, steamship lines, factories and the like)?

3. For Chu, what is the key to strengthening the empire? Do you agree or disagree with his analysis? Why?

4. What factors does Kang Youwei point to as causes of the Qing empire’s weakness?

5. What kind of reform measures might reasonably follow from Kang’s analysis of the causes of the empire’s weakness?

6. Are there causes of weakness that Kang does not point to? How would a reform program be different if those causes were brought into the picture?

7. How does Kang justify the idea of reform? Why does he use the arguments that he does? What does his method of justification reveal about the opponents of reform and the arguments that they might make against Kang?

8. How does the imperial government justify the concept of administrative reform? Why is it necessary to use that particular argument?

9. How do the imperial officials analyze the causes of the Qing empire’s weakness? What factors do they point to as causes for that weakness?

10. Are there causes for the Qing empire’s weakness that the government does not mention? If so, how would mention of those causes change the envisioned strategy for reform?

Further writing: complete this at home prior to our next class meeting. Be prepared to share your answer in class.

11. Compare the three sources in reference to their analysis of the reforms needed and the causes of Qing weakness. What are the similarities and differences in their approach? Also, discuss the origins, purpose, value and limitations of each source briefly.