Calls for Institutional Reform

Liang was a precocious student of Kang who went on to become the leading spokesman for reform in the decade leading up to the 1911 Revolution. Liang was more sober-minded than Kang, and he emerged as a reform leader when he was still in his twenties. His “General Discussion of Reform,” published serially in 1896 and 1897, called for the government to encourage ideas from below and to expand the educational system—including girl’s schools—rapidly. These ideas amounted to calling for the restructuring of Chinese society. For example, Liang foresaw the replacement of the hoary examination system, one of the most fundamental institutions of imperial China, with a system of mass education. He praised the reforms of Meiji Japan that had established a school system based largely on a Westernized curriculum. Liang thought the Chinese people too “ignorant” and “aimless” to immediately be given power, so he supported top-down reforms, but there should be no mistaking his ultimate intentions. In calling for a kind of gentry democracy, Liang was challenging the political monopolies of the court and the bureaucracy. Furthermore, Liang’s published criticisms of the “despotism” of the monarchical system were pointed if indirect. He criticized emperors who had isolated themselves from the people and selfishly refused to take care of them. In a private letter he frankly explained his views:

> The strength of a nation stems ultimately from democracy. This is the nature of democracy. Monarchism is simply selfishness while democracy is simply public-mindedness. “Public-mindedness” is the ultimate standard of governance while “selfishness” is rooted in humanity.
And privately, to his students, Liang raised the treasonous question of whether the Qing rulers, as foreign Manchus, could lead the necessary reforms.

By the summer of 1898 Cixi was in semi-retirement and the reformers finally won the ear of the Guangxu emperor, her nephew. They fought to streamline the bureaucracy and to strengthen the powers of the emperor so he could push through reforms—ideas that aroused enormous opposition from vested interests. The emperor announced his intention to listen to all good ideas, but the reform proposals stopped well short of a parliament, a constitution, or other democratic institution-building. Still, the specter of outside challenges to the intertwined interests of the Manchus, the court, and the bureaucracy had suddenly emerged from the shadows.

Many historians feel this was China’s last chance to “enter the modern era without revolution.” Others think this view vastly overblown, a reflection of the propaganda spread by the reformers after their defeat. At any rate, the Guangxu Emperor did issue a stream of decrees and edicts over the summer of 1898. He reformed the examination system to emphasize current affairs over the classics, he converted Buddhist monasteries to public schools, he abolished Manchu sinecures and many government positions, and he established new bureaus of commerce, industry, and agriculture. The army and navy were to be modernized. And, in a kind of vindication of Kang’s temerity of 1895, low level officials and even ordinary literati were encouraged to send memorials directly to the emperor.

The reforms challenged not only officeholders but the great majority of educated Chinese whose livelihoods, educations, and cultural assumptions were all threatened. Some officials and Manchu aristocrats felt the dynasty itself was in jeopardy. And the
vast bureaucracy took no steps to carry out Guangxu’s wishes, instead waiting inert for the reaction of his aunt, Cixi. Guangxu’s remaking of the Chinese state was only a revolution on paper.

Cixi had been the dominant political figure in China since the 1870s, balancing reformist and conservative officials without ever committing the court fully to either side. Originally a minor concubine of the Xianfeng emperor, Cixi had provided him with his only son. After Xianfeng’s death in 1861 in the wake of the first British invasion of Beijing, with the help of some powerful royal allies, she was able to gain a share of power as de facto regent for her son. Cixi cemented her powers in 1875 when her young nephew was named the Guangxu emperor after her son’s death. Nonetheless, as Guangxu entered his twenties, Cixi began to step into the background. She was apparently content with the new reformist agenda, at least when it first began in 1898.

However, by the end of the summer, after Guangxu had begun firing important officials and promoting his own men, fearing for her own position and perhaps believing court rumors that the reformers were plotting to overthrow the Manchus, Cixi acted. Indeed, by this time the reformers were looking for a way to eliminate her, asking the reforming military leader Yuan Shikai to help them. He, however, reported the plot, and on September 21 she announced her resumption of power. Cixi in effect staged a coup, putting the emperor under house arrest. She had Guangxu’s supporters cashiered and six reformers executed without trial—a rare event show how frightened the court was. She even ordered Kang Youwei’s family graves destroyed. There would have been more deaths, but Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, among others, managed to escape with help from the foreign legations. Guangxu was kept under a kind of house arrest for the rest of
his life, living on a small island in the Forbidden City’s lakes. By the end of the week, virtually all the emperor’s reforms were revoked. A new era of reaction was instituted as, after the coup, the court fell more firmly than ever into the hands of conservatives who were to prove sympathetic to the Boxers.

The crisscrossing lines of historians’ debates have divided those sympathetic to Guangxu and the radical reform effort from those sympathetic to, if not Cixi and reaction, at least to a better-planned reform program; those who feel Kang was a strong influence on Guangxu and the reform from those who think his role was smaller; those who blame Kang for causing disorder from those who think he was trying to shore up the failing dynasty; those who see the events of 1898 as political infighting between court supporters of Cixi and Guangxu from those who see 1898 as about more significant issues; and those who see in 1898 a real break with the past from those who see more continuity with the “self-strengthening” program of the earlier generation. Generally, most historians agree that Kang’s influence on the emperor and the imperial camp was crucial to giving the reforms their thoroughgoing edge, and that while the reforms were not well planned, they were in historical fact defeated by the coup led by Cixi, a woman skilled in court intrigue but ignorant of the world. In other words, an old story: good-guy reformers versus evil reactionaries.

Revisionists have struck at this view from a variety of perspectives. One issue they all raise is the problems in the accounts of the events of 1898 written by Kang and Liang as part of their attacks on the Qing. However, to pick holes in the Kang-Liang story of good versus evil is not the same as proving that an essentially different chain of events transpired. Even if not true in every detail, the standard version of 1898 influenced the
attitudes of contemporaries and later generations alike. How Liang Qichao’s interpretation of events became mainstream history and how it played to existing prejudices (that women should not hold power, for example) is a fascinating story in its own right. But the immediate point is that even the most sympathetic approach to Cixi cannot make her into a great reformer in an era when reforms were plainly necessary. If she was not the monster of traditional image, neither was she capable of providing China dynamic leadership.

Cixi was wrong to think that Kang Youwei was trying to subvert the dynasty, but he did want—eventually—to turn the Qing into a constitutional monarchy. At the same time, Kang urged Guangxu to act as forcefully as Japan’s Meiji Emperor or Russia’s Peter the Great. The problem was that although Cixi was not entirely opposed to reform, her political career was based on balancing reformist and conservative impulses in the court and among the military. Reforms had thus been left largely to individual provincial governors, some of whom built new schools and military arsenals, developed mines and railroads, and streamlined administration—and some of whom did not. Yuan Shikai was himself a proponent of reform, but that did not mean he was willing to risk turning the government over to inexperienced and untried men. In 1898 Guangxu was willing to go beyond the leisurely and piecemeal reforms of the previous two generations, no doubt in part because this provided an avenue for advancing his power, and Kang Youwei provided the intellectual inspiration for policy reforms. However, when it came to the difficult question of implementing reforms, neither Kang nor Guangxu had much political experience. Kang’s arrogance and self-righteousness discouraged strategic alliances. The Beijing bureaucracy was strongly conservative, and by September leading
officials apparently convinced Cixi that Guangxu’s actions were threatening the dynasty. Both sides mobilized their forces, and both appealed to Yuan Shikai. Thus did the reform movement come to a literally bloody end.

Kang Youwei had offered Guangxu a new kind of monarchy. Ultimately, through a constitution and a parliament, Guangxu could achieve the ideals established by the ancient sage-kings. The emperor was to form “one body” with the people, as a sacred symbol but not possessing many real political powers. Kang explained that in a parliamentary system “the ruler and the citizens discuss the nation’s politics and laws together.” The parliament made the laws, legal officials adjudicated them, and the government administered them. “The ruler remains in general charge.” But apparently has little to do. Perhaps, then, Cixi was right to see the reformers as a direct threat, but the Confucian sage-ruler (and his sage-adviser) appear alive and well in Kang’s vision.

The reason why Chinese still remember the hundred days of reform—as witnessed by public discussions held around China on its hundredth anniversary in 1998—is precisely because Kang and Liang made it the opening chapter of an ongoing drama of change and redemption for the Chinese nation. The “hundred days” suggested that China might adopt a fast, top-down route to modernity. This dream scarcely died with the martyrs of 1898.

The defeat of the reforms in September 1898 led directly to the Boxer Uprising. The Boxers, of course, had their own pressing concerns, having nothing to do with court politics or gentry intellectuals. But they achieved importance on the national—and international—stage solely because of the court’s toleration. Like modern historians, conservative court officials interpreted the 1898 reform movement in terms of foreign
influences. The Boxers seemed, just possibly, the answer to this problem. Ironically, however, the convincing defeat of the unorganized Qing forces, Cixi’s humiliating escape from Beijing, and the general failure of the conservatives’ response to the reformers resulted in a real reform program after 1901.

The Qing’s “New Policy” reforms differed little from the proposals of 1898, now no longer seen as so radical. The bureaucracy was to be streamlined, new schools built, a modern infrastructure developed; within a few years, the old examination system was to be abolished and a constitution put into place. By this time, the Qing faced continuous pressure to do more, faster. Impatient reformers like Liang Qichao still castigated the Qing for not moving fast enough; and in many towns and cities across China local elites, often reading Liang and other “radicals,” were pressing for their own rights to political participation. Outright revolutionaries were claiming that the Qing reforms were merely a trap designed to fool the Chinese into accepting a foreign, Manchu court’s continued misrule. Before we turn to these struggles in chapter two, the rest of this chapter will examine the political and cultural background of the reform movement.