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The “Self-Strengthening” Movement in China, 1898

A critical issue for the Chinese since their defeat in the Opium War in 1842, was how to regain their loss of sovereignty. While most of those responsible for leading China preferred to continue the policies of the past, there were some officials who, in the 1870's, advocated reform in the form of a “self-strengthening” movement. With the slogan, “Learn the superior technology of the barbarian, in order to control him,” the Tongzhi (T'ung-chih) Restoration led to new plans for a modern army and navy, industrialization and changes within the diplomatic corps, but the changes were slow for lack of government support. The “Hundred Days of Reform” would sprout in 1898, after China's shocking defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), with decrees issued by the dozens. The following selection presents a case for change in the form of a memorial written by Zhang Zhidong (Chang Chih-tung; 1837-1909) to Emperor Guangxu (Kuang-hsu, reigned 1875-1908), who assumed the position of emperor at the age of three and struggled throughout his reign to break away from the power of his aunt, the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908). Zhang's essay was translated and published in English as *China's Only Hope*.

Discussion Questions

1. In one of his statements, the writer suggests, “Know what is important.” What did he mean by this? What additional proposals would you have made?
2. When Zhang refers to the parable of Confucius, what do you think his purpose and his intended audience were?
3. What aspects of Western values and institutions does the writer admire and how does he suggest China make use of them? What is his opinion of China? Of its values?

Reading

From Chang Chih-tung, *China's Only Hope: An Appeal*, trans. by Samuel I. Woodbridge, New York, 1900, pp. 19–21, 25, 26.

In no period of China's history has there arisen an emergency like the present. It is a time of change, and His Imperial Highness, the Emperor of China, has accepted the situation by altering somewhat the system of civil and military examinations and by establishing schools. . . . The Conservatives are evidently off their food from inability to swallow, whilst Liberals are like a flock of sheep who have arrived at a road of many forks and do not know which to follow. The former do not understand what international intercourse means, the latter are ignorant of what is radical in Chinese affairs. The Conservatives fail to see the utility of modern military methods and the benefits of successful change, while the Progressionists, zealous without knowledge, look with contempt upon our widespread doctrines of Confucius. Thus those who cling to the order of things heartily despise those who even propose any innovation, and they in turn

cordially detest the Conservatives with all the ardor of their liberal convictions. It thus falls out that those who really wish to learn are in doubt as to which course to pursue, and in the meantime error creeps in, the enemy invades our coast, and, consequently, there is no defence and no peace.

The present condition of things is not due to outside nations, but to China herself. It has ever been true that the number of our able men has been proportioned to the good qualities of the government, and that morals are gauged by the conduct of the schools. In view of many facts, and with the hope of relieving our country from her present embarrassments, We, the Viceroy of the Liang Hu, have prepared this work especially for the Chinese under our jurisdiction, and generally for our countrymen in the other provinces. . . .

The corollaries of these Twenty Chapters may be briefly Comprehended in Five Objects of Knowledge.

1. Know the shame of not being like Japan, Turkey, Siam, and Cuba.
2. Know the fear that we will become India, Annam, Burmah, Korea, Egypt, and Poland.
3. Know that if we do not change our customs we cannot reform our methods, and if we do not reform our methods we cannot utilize the modern implements of war, etc.
4. Know what is important. The study of the old is not urgent; the call for men of attainments in useful knowledge is pressing. Foreign education is of different kinds. Western handicraft is not in demand, but a knowledge of the methods of foreign governments is a consummation devoutly to be wished.
5. Know what is radical. When abroad, do not forget your own native country; when you see strange customs, do not forget your parents; and let not much wisdom and ingenuity make you forgot the holy sages.

It will be seen then that the purport of what we have written accords well with the Doctrine of the Mean. Long ago, when the kingdom of Lu was in a weak condition, Duke Ai (B. C. 550) inquired of Confucius about government. He replied: "To be fond of learning is the next thing to knowledge. To be up and doing comes near to perfection. Know what shame is, and you will not be far from heroism." Finally the sage said: "If these principles can be carried out, although one may be stupid, yet he will become clever; although weak, he will attain to strength." These maxims were spoken in the time of Lu. How much more urgent are they now when China has become great, with her almost limitless territory and her teeming population of four hundred millions! . . .

Chapter 1. United Hearts

How circumscribed would be the responsibility of one graduate, the altruism of one official, or the duty of a single individual! But if by one determined purpose the hearts of *all* the graduates, the officials, and the men of China were united, our country would rest upon a great rock and we could defy the world to overthrow us. To attain this object it is necessary first that every man should fulfill his duty to his parents and elders.

The country would then be at peace. And if every Chinese would but exercise his wisdom and courage the Empire would become strong

We would here state that there are now three things necessary to be done in order to save China from revolution. The first is to *maintain the reigning dynasty*; the second is to *conserve the Holy Religion*; and the third is to *protect the Chinese race*. These are inseparably connected; in fact they constitute one. . . .

Under the present circumstances there is nothing for it but to arouse ourselves to the situation. Let us display our loyalty and love and embrace every opportunity to become wealthy and strong; let our first object be the veneration of the Imperial Court which vouchsafes its protection to the Commonwealth, and let those who hold the reins of government consider the general good. . . .

Chapter III. The Three Moral Obligations

The Sovereign is the head of the Subject, the Father is the head of the Son, and the Husband is the head of the Wife. These tenets have been handed down from the sages, and as Heaven does not change, so they never change. They constitute the first of the Five Relations and the mainspring of every act. . . . Know then, that the obligation of subject to sovereign is incompatible with republicanism

Now, we have examined somewhat into the methods of Western Governments. They have their Lords and Commons, their Senates and Representatives, which hold their prerogatives in State matters. But we have noticed that the Sovereign, or the President, retains the power of dissolving these assemblies; and in case one assembly does not suit him he exercises this power, dismisses the obnoxious body and convenes another. A Constitutional Government with a Sovereign, and a Republic are about the same. In the West the intercourse of Sovereign, Ministers, and People is easy, the rules of deportment meagre, and the needs of the people are communicated to the sovereign with rapid facility; but the bearing or dignity of the Western Prince is not to be compared with that of the Chinese Emperor. Western people, however, love their sovereigns more than the Chinese do theirs, and, although they may leave home and live abroad thousands of miles from their native land they do not disobey their country's laws or defraud their rulers. . . . It is a mistake, then, to suppose that Western countries do not maintain the doctrine of the Relation of Subject to Sovereign. . . .

Chapter IV. The Recognition of Class

The highest degree of culture was reached in the Chow (B. C. 1122–255) Dynasty. Then began the decline about which Confucius grieved. The Dynasties following had no powerful neighbors to strive against, but heaped up large treasures of literary lore at the expense of power. This accumulation produced the hollowness of forms, and this, in turn begat weakness. Not so all the countries of Europe. These were opened up at a late period in history, fresh and vigorous. Surrounded by strong neighbors, they were always in circumstances of desperate competition, stripped for a fight and ever striving to escape destruction. Continual apprehension produced determination, and determination begat strength. Of all countries China alone has for these fifty years proved

herself almost irreclaimably stupid and not awake. Many of the officials and people are proud and indolent. They contentedly rest in the belief that the old order of things will suffice for those dangerous times, and in the end become the easy prey of outsiders. . . .

Chapter IX. Cast Out the Poison

The Custom's Returns for the past few years give the value of our imports at 80,000,000 Taels, and the exports at 50,000,000 Taels. The balance of *thirty million Taels* represents what has been consumed in smoking the pernicious opium pipe! Assuredly it is not foreign intercourse that is ruining China, but his dreadful poison. Oh, the grief and desolation it has wrought to our people! . . . Opium has spread with frightful rapidity and heart-rending results through the provinces. Millions upon millions have been struck down by the plague. To-day it is running like wildfire. In its swift, deadly course it is spreading devastation everywhere, wrecking the minds and eating away the strength of its victims. The ruin of the mind is the most woeful of its many deleterious effects. . . .

Therefore we say, bring learning to the front in order to remedy the opium evil! . . . All the countries of the world recoil with disgust at the idea of smoking this vile, illsmelling, poisonous stuff. Only our Chinese people love to sleep and eat with the deadly drug, and in the deadly drug we are selfsteeped, seeking poverty, imbecility, death, destruction. . . .