China in War and Revolution, 1895–1949

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1 The rise of Confucian radicalism

At the end of April, 1895, Kang Youwei, a 37-year-old aspiring candidate to high government, drafted a petition to the emperor demanding that the Qing refuse to surrender to Japan and that it immediately undertake a series of fundamental reforms. Shocked equally by China's defeat at the hands of the Japanese in Korea and by the harshness of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, about 1,200 of the candidates who had come along with Kang to Beijing for the highest-level civil service examinations (*jinshi*) signed the petition. This was equivalent to a mass protest. The signers risked the wrath of the Qing court, which had, after all, committed itself to the treaty and did not countenance criticism.

According to the treaty, the Qing would pay 200 million taels in indemnities; recognize Japan's pre-eminence in Korea; cede Taiwan and the Pescadores to Japan; open four more treaty ports; and grant Japan the right to build factories around any treaty port. Through most-favored-nation clauses in earlier treaties, the other Powers automatically received the same rights. Looking forward, we can see that the war thus opened China to direct foreign investment: this became a major route for modern technology to reach China. As foreign investments grew – almost $800 million in 1902 and well over $1.5 billion by 1914 – the Powers found themselves with a stake in China's economic stability. The war also marked Japan's rise as a Pacific power in its own right. Looking back, we can see it as one of a string of defeats China had suffered since the 1840s, each defeat giving the foreign powers greater commercial, religious, diplomatic, and even territorial rights. But this particular defeat was especially shocking since China – after several decades of "self-strengthening" modeled on Western technology – had expected to win the war. It was even more shocking because Chinese officials had long perceived Japan as an insignificant island on the periphery of Chinese civilization.

In this chapter I outline the basis of the 1895 protest movement and the political typhoon it provoked, and I try to show why this period marks the origins of modern politics and culture in China. What "modern" suggests here is the first of a series of calls to enlarge political participation, a process that involved rethinking how the Chinese state should be structured. In

addition, as Kang Youwei (1858–1927) was aware, the older generation of political leaders had little sense of the enormous economic, technological, and cultural dynamism of Western civilization, the cut-throat rivalries of the nation-state system, the relentless nature of progress, or the need to reform China's most fundamental institutions to employ national energies more efficiently. The movement Kang spearheaded looked backward to Chinese tradition for sources of inspiration, sideways to Europe and Japan for models that could be utilized, and forward, against its own original intentions, to the overthrow of a dynasty that proved unable to reform quickly enough.[1] Kang and his generation of Confucian radicals wished to combine loyalty to the Confucian values and worldview that they had been raised on with loyalty to the emperor; loyalty to the emperor with loyalty to a reformed Qing system; and loyalty to the Qing with loyalty to the nation, the Chinese people as a whole. They began to ask new questions: Who was the nation? How were the Chinese people to be defined? Did loyalty to the nation mean support for strong government? What kind of government?

"Confucian radicalism" – though it may sound like an oxymoron – signifies strident calls for thorough-going reform based on readings of the Confucian classics and made by men (women had not yet found a political voice) educated in the Confucian tradition. If these men called for a measure of Westernization, it was a program none the less rooted in a Confucian view of the world. They wanted China to become strong, standing unchallenged among the sovereign powers. They wanted, in other words, to be able to pick and choose what foreign ideas they would adopt. However, in the rapid expansion of imperialist threats against China after 1895 the fear was that these foreign powers would "carve up China like a melon" and even that the Chinese people might perish. Hopes and fears thus meshed to produce an atmosphere of unimaginable tension. In 1895, though, even the younger generation of educated Chinese gentlemen still had few doubts about the fundamental legitimacy of their culture.

Their immediate political challenge was that mere examination candidates, even experienced, mature men like themselves, did not have the right to petition the emperor. Neither the emperor nor the Empress Dowager, Cixi, who actually controlled the court, saw Kang's petition, since Beijing officials confiscated it. It was lengthy (nicknamed the "ten-thousand-word memorial"), and its real point went beyond the demand for continued resistance against Japan, significant as that was. Kang and his cohorts were demanding a fundamental reordering of the entire political system. A few of the most insightful of the younger gentry understood something of the power of national unity. Tang Caichang, soon to become one of Kang's followers, wrote his brother in 1895: "You cannot stand alone as a scholar and despise them [the peasants] as the ignorant masses. If you first gain their hearts, in the future when war comes, you will have help in the midst of confusion."[2] Kang's petition called upon the government to promote industry; modernize the army; build railroads, a postal system, and a

merchant marine; employ "good men," even using the talents of the Overseas Chinese (mostly lower-class merchants but technically and commercially skilled); and improve agriculture through training schools. Today, such reforms may not sound particularly radical, but they envisioned a much more active government than any China had seen before. The petition did not shrink from calling on the government to raise taxes. More tellingly, the reformers envisioned an active citizenry: people not just dedicated to their families and local community good but to fueling China's growth and progress.

Kang Youwei was from Guangdong Province, near Guangzhou (Canton), the city where the modern Western presence had been felt for the longest time. His background is described by the historian Jerome Grieder: "born into a solid gentry family, an heir to the great culture … he set out at an early age to become what in fact he became, in his own estimate at least: a Confucian Sage."[3] From an early age, Kang appointed himself to save humankind, and although he studied the Confucian classics and Buddhism and read many Western works in translation, he can only be understood as a religious leader, not a scholar. After a period of intense study in 1878, when he was twenty-one, he experienced a breakdown, followed by an awakening. As Kang later recollected:

> While sitting in meditation, I suddenly saw that the ten thousand creatures of Heaven and Earth and I were all of the same body; a great light dawned, and I believed I was a sage: then I laughed with joy. Suddenly I thought of the sufferings of life: then I cried with melancholy. Suddenly I thought of the parent I was not serving – how could I be studying? – then forthwith I packed up and went back to dwell by his grave.[4]

Kang succeeded in passing the 1895 *jinshi* exams. Leaving Beijing that autumn, Kang and his disciples, most notably Liang Qichao (1873–1929), quickly went on to establish new "study societies" designed to turn young, educated Chinese into a potent political force. With revealing names like the "Society for the Study of National Strength" a number of similar groups formed libraries, schools, and publishing projects, sometimes under the auspices of sympathetic provincial governors. Their journals called for ever more radical reforms: notions of parliamentary democracy, "popular power," and equality began to be aired.

The radical Confucians' main goal was to "unify" the emperor and the people. Thus parliaments were not thought of as bodies representing diverse interests, much less conflicting wills, but as locations where "communication between top and bottom" would be established and consensus reached. The old Confucian faith in community solidarity was thus given fresh institutional guise. But the sense that non-officials, even commoners, should *participate* in the affairs of state was a sign of the radicalism of the day. The "people" were emerging into Chinese public consciousness as a force in their

own right. Who the people were exactly remained to be determined, but the Confucian radicals looked to them with hope. The Confucian classics spoke of *minben* – the people as the basis of the state – saying that the duty of the ruler was to feed and clothe his people, since the kingdom would collapse without them. *Minben* was thus a rather paternalistic morality of the elite and also a practical tool. Although the reformers saw *minben* as the cultural basis on which real democracy might be built, the Confucian *minben* had never allowed for the people's active political participation. In other words, it represented an ideal of rulership *for* the people, but not *of* or *by* the people. The Confucian radicals did not regard themselves as mere commoners and, in their calls for the court to expand the political processes, they had themselves mostly in mind. Still, the reformers understood that in the new world of imperialism and competing nation-states, the people had to be incorporated into the political life of the community. The first to preach this doctrine was Liang Qichao.

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 girls' 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 criticised 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.[5]

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."[6] 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. None the less, 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 21 September 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 that shows 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 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, if not to 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.[7] 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.[8] 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."[9] 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 2, the rest of this chapter will examine the political and cultural background of the reform movement.

Confucian radicalism in political context

As political activists demanding to be heard, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao pointed forward to the twentieth century. They demanded that the political realm be expanded to all educated men. But to understand them, we must also look at the milieu from which they emerged. The traditional literati expected respect and power to accrue to themselves, first on the basis of their participation in Confucian culture – their mastery of sacred classic texts – and second, more clearly, on the basis of their examination success. For the successful individual, schooling led to taking a series of exams, often over twenty years or more, and eventually to degree status, prestige, and office. This is one of the dreams Kang Youwei had for himself. There were essentially three sets of exams of increasing difficulty. First, the county-level exams produced a relatively large number of *xiucai*, "budding scholars"; then the provincial-level exams produced a much smaller number of *juren*, "raised candidates"; and finally the metropolitan exams (held every three years in Beijing) produced a few dozen *jinshi*, or "literati presented" to the emperor for appointment. In 1895 Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were *juren* come to Beijing to try to become *jinshi*. That the student (Liang) had begun passing the exams at a much younger age than his teacher (Kang) denoted his precocious brilliance, but did not affect their master–disciple relationship, if only because everybody understood that the exams were in part a lottery. Even though the quotas were kept low, by the late Qing there were too many educated men passing the exams for the government to employ them all. Many became teachers (like Kang), or secretaries to high officials, or went into business, managed their family's properties, wrote books, pursued antiquarian researches, retired to genteel poverty, or perhaps even joined the revolution. Yet whatever their careers, all such men were members of an elite culture that revolved around classical learning.

Moreover, all the members of this culture learned the dictates of Confucian morality. Morality was based on a hierarchical vision of society and emphasized ritual conduct. Inequality was natural: as Heaven stands above the earth, so men above women, fathers above sons, and emperors above their subjects. There were obligations on both sides: essentially, the lower owed loyalty and

obedience to the higher, the higher were to take care of and love the lower. The gentry who studied the classics and took the exams that the government organized assumed they were responsible for the social order. For one, the imperial government did not have enough officials to take care of all the tasks that governments now perform. The scholars thus became natural community leaders in the villages and towns across all China. This role was confirmed by the Confucian classics, which called on men of "virtue" to lead, and by history, which repeatedly proved their indispensability in resolving disputes between neighbors, in raising funds to build dikes or raise militia, in teaching the masses how to behave. A deep-seated sense of social responsibility was something that shaped even the most anti-traditional Chinese intellectuals.

It must be stressed that Confucian morality was by no means restricted to a small minority. Rather, since basic literacy was fairly widespread, various popularized versions of Confucianism dominated most levels of Chinese society. For example, although Confucius himself condemned "profit" and valued the peasantry, in a way often found among elites in agrarian societies, merchants still found much of value in the Confucian tradition. Guides on how to morally achieve commercial success proliferated during the Qing.[10] They even promised that the ambitious businessman could make money and be a gentleman at the same time. Many of the most basic values associated with Confucianism like filial piety – the duties owed by children to their parents – might simply be called Chinese. It is also worth noting that the high Confucian world was not restricted by birth; nearly all male subjects of the Empire could legally take the exams. Where boys had to work from an early age, they had no time for the necessary training, but economic mobility could eventually lead a family's descendants to exam success. Only a few despised castes and professional groups such as boatmen and actors were banned from the exams; lower-level government workers such as constables, tax prompters, and office clerks were banned as well, presumably in order to keep such a potentially powerful but non-classically trained group in order.

A man *might*, if he were talented and lucky, pass the county exams in his early twenties; the provincial in his late twenties or early thirties, thus perhaps qualifying for office after a period; and the metropolitan exams any time between thirty and death, which might lead to immediate appointment in the Outer Court. By 1850, of the men qualified to take them, only 0.05 percent would pass the provincial exams. Memorization of the standard texts began by the age of five. Of course, the vast majority of such men came from quite privileged backgrounds or had wealthy relatives who could sponsor the long years of schooling that were required. A few prominent families managed to produce exam successes across five centuries, which also suggests the social stability of late imperial China. This was in some ways a grim world of arid pedantry, whole lives blighted in futile attempts to please the examiners year after year. But it could also be an exciting world: intellectually dynamic, open to sensuous and literary experience, and with the promise of prestige, wealth, and power.[11]

The group of exam-aspirants comprised at least several million men. Highly acculturated "Confucians" represented about 5 percent of the population.[12] Their world was marked by mastery of a difficult literary language, and its members shared a refined manner and etiquette. Even the low-ranking "budding scholars" were allowed to wear clothing that set them off from the masses. They won certain legal privileges, including immunity from judicial torture and some tax exemptions. But official status was no guarantee of morality, honesty, or even much capacity to earn a living. Higher officials wore minutely graded marks of their status, earned generous salaries, and could usually count on receiving even more generous gifts from supplicants. All were "gentry," a term that refers to two overlapping categories in the English-language literature on China. First, it is a translation of the Chinese *shenshi*, which was essentially a legal category denoting precisely those who had passed the exams; second, it refers in a broader way not only to these men but also their families, perhaps even down to a third generation, and even more broadly to families with simply the wealth, education, and manners necessary to adopt the gentry lifestyle.

Kang and Liang sought in 1895 to take these individuals who loosely shared a culture and organize them into a community, a kind of lobbying group, through "study societies" and journals. They found a ready audience precisely because of the changes China had already produced. After the great Taiping Rebellion of the 1860s, the Qing began to include modern specializations like mathematics in some of the exams. Examiners began to ask about the history of Western institutions and politics. The purely classical education was being nudged in new directions. Moreover, the schools, arsenals, and shipyards created by the self-strengthening movement had produced new career paths like military technicians and Western experts. They lacked the prestige of the regular civil service, but the two groups were not isolated from one another. Missionary schools had even produced Western-style doctors and nurses. Thus a broad and socially diverse constituency for reform emerged.

The actions taken by Kang and his co-conspirators were illegal but not entirely unprecedented. Kang had presented his first illegal demand for reforms directly to the Throne in 1888. The Qing was particularly allergic to "factions." Officials were to serve as individuals: not exactly as cogs in the bureaucratic machine, but as disinterestedly loyal to the emperor alone. Yet the political reality had long been one of political groupings, often in the guise of scholarly and literary affiliations. Officials, powerful provincial gentry families, and lowly secretaries all had ways of finding each other. These collaborations became widespread in the disturbed decades leading up to the Opium War of 1840.[13] There were earlier examples as well. In the histories written by the gentry, exemplary officials risked all to remonstrate with their emperor. During the Southern Song (1127–1279), a "war party" repeatedly demanded that the North be won back from the barbarians. An example closer to home was the "Donglin movement" that had emerged in the late Ming (1368–1644) as

a response to corruption and disorder.[14] Proclaiming its adherence to orthodox Confucian virtue, the Donglin movement criticized court morality and demanded that "good men" be appointed to office. These were not mere platitudes; they were weapons in a factional struggle encouraged by the emperor's blatant disregard of all governmental affairs. Unlike the late Qing reformers, the Donglin movement lacked a specific political program, but its leaders provided some inspiration for the later generation.

More immediately, Kang Youwei was heir to the *qingliu* (disinterested scholars) movement. This had been a self-consciously orthodox reaction to the Opium War and the Taiping Rebellion, and originally earned a hawkish, "conservative" reputation for its anti-Westernism. But a sharp rhetoric of protest and critique, under conditions of growing foreign pressure, led to surprising shifts. Although *qingliu* adherents tended to come from the lower ranks of the bureaucracy, they were involved in court politics and had a few high-ranking sponsors. They were less a specific political faction, however, than networks of associates based on scholarly interests, political concerns, and ties of patronage and friendship. Their *qingyi* (pure opinions) provided a context for exchanges over the relationship between morality and policy. A call for the promotion of talent and broadening of discussion was hardly unorthodox, but implied a challenge to autocracy. By the 1890s *qingliu* adherents formed the basis of the "Emperor's party" as young Guangxu began to emerge from Cixi's shadow. They called for "public discussion": that is, for the government to listen to the lower officials. And so Kang was hardly alone in demanding that imperialist pressures be resisted. Not modern military technology but rousing the people to fight for their country would defeat the foreigners. Distrust of the people was the mark of a corrupt and flaccid regime. The *qingyi* movement of the 1890s thus sought to reform government and the economy in order to mobilize the population – under local gentry, in turn cooperating with the bureaucracy.

In this way a new political force – public opinion – was being created. Kang Youwei's role was to break out of the bureaucratic embrace to mobilize a general literati protest. Most *qingliu* officials were shocked by Kang's views of "Confucius as a reformer" and his "wild" interpretations of the classics. None the less, they had done much to prepare the way for Kang. Following the Sino-Japanese War, Kang's writings began to appear openly in the newspapers that had become essential reading for gentry and students in the cities. Kang was not the only man demanding to be heard during the never-ending national and local crises of the late Qing. He was a singular example of larger trends, trends that culminated in the 1911 Revolution.

Confucian radicalism in cultural context

To gauge the full extent of Kang's radicalism, it is not enough merely to look at his political views. His attempt to reinvent Confucianism as a philosophy of social change was even more radical since it challenged not just the

policies of the government but its cultural basis. And in the *failure* to reinvent Confucianism lay the future destruction of the entire cultural edifice of the imperial system: the emperor and his court, the recruitment of the bureaucracy through the exam system, and the very enterprise of classical learning – the worldview that had not only socialized generation after generation of gentry, but also provided the glue that held together the various regions and the diverse classes. To understand the significance of this, it is necessary to review such esoteric debates of the eighteenth century as "Song Learning" versus "Han Learning," "New Text" versus "Old Text," and the rise of "evidential studies" (*kaozhengxue*). To the scholars of the eighteenth century, of course, these were not esoteric: they were the stuff of academic careers, social commentary, and even political snakes-and-ladders.

The academic trends of the Qing period led eventually to the de-canonization of classical learning. Qing scholars proved that various parts of the sacred classics (supposedly written before Confucius, or before the sixth century BC) were in fact later forgeries of the Han dynasty (209 BC–AD 206). Having noted this problem, however, Qing scholars did *not* immediately suffer a crisis of faith but, rather, found ways to continue believing in the essential truths of the classics. Well into the nineteenth century, there seemed no pressing reason to doubt them. But after the political catastrophes of foreign invasion and domestic rebellions, the cosmological kingship could no longer stand. Before discussing its collapse, let us examine the roots of a political ideology of enormous persuasive power, linking the emperor to the very nature of the cosmos.

The ideology that proclaimed the emperor to be the Son of Heaven had possessed about the same propaganda functions as "divine right" in the West, but it rested on a completely different base. "Heaven" to Chinese literati was not an anthropomorphic, omnipotent, intentional force but rather more like the balance of the cosmos or a kind of natural law. The Chinese emperor was given a "mandate" due to the sacred qualities of virtue and ritual propriety that he embodied. Real emperors of course were known to make mistakes, act at whim, and even commit crimes. Moreover, the principle of inheritance of the Throne by sons from their fathers was at odds with Confucian ideals. One of the fundamental tensions of the traditional Chinese polity thus lay between the emperor as the Son of Heaven on the one hand and as the mere son of his father on the other. Another tension – institutional as well as ideological – lay between the emperor on the one hand and the gentry as the masters of the tradition, of the sacred texts, on the other. Individually, gentry and even officials were politically powerless before the Throne, but collectively they maintained a certain moral autonomy. Most Sons of Heaven acknowledged their need to practice self-cultivation and engaged in self-criticisms when disaster struck. An earthquake or even a peasant uprising, for example, were seen to reflect the personal morality of the emperor. And though it would have been impolitic to dwell on it, everyone knew that in the end all dynasties were subject to Heaven's change of the Mandate.

The political order and the moral order were both related to a cosmological symbolism that represented change within a larger harmony. On the popular level as well as in the sometimes cabalistic musings of philosophers, ideas about the five agents, yin–yang, and the hexagrams of the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*) presented an organic vision of the universe all of whose parts were interrelated. In the Song dynasty (960–1279) Confucian thinking developed a cosmology that both rationalized these elements in terms of a sophisticated metaphysics and emphasized the moral nature of the cosmos. The interpretations of the Cheng-Zhu school (named after its leading spokesmen) eventually became orthodoxy and were enshrined as the basis of the examination system until nearly the end of the Qing dynasty. Although Cheng-Zhu emphasized that social hierarchies were embedded in the nature of the cosmos, it also spoke of the obligations of parents, elders, and rulers. This is why the Son of Heaven himself would engage in self-criticism. Not merely outright rebellion, but unusual natural occurrences might call forth rituals of humility. An earthquake, say, might be interpreted by the court as a sign of Heaven's warning that the emperor had neglected his duties or that the people were suffering. This did not diminish the emperor's real powers in the least, but clearly shows how nature, morality, and the political and social orders were placed in the same conceptual net.

Some of the premises of this worldview fell under attack in the eighteenth century.[15] Qing "evidential studies" and Han Learning began as rebellions against trends of the Ming dynasty that were considered decadent. Qing scholars blamed a subjective approach to the classics for resulting in a kind of individualism that was destructive of good order and ultimately the fall of the Ming. Intuitive moral reasoning was condemned; instead, Qing scholars turned back to the original classics, using techniques of philology and astronomical dating to authenticate what were Confucius's real words. This more empirical approach was thus "evidential" and compared different texts in great detail; it was also called "Han Learning" because it relied on Han dynasty commentaries as being closer to the original texts, as opposed to the more intuitive Song Learning.

This fundamental philosophical shift dominated most of the intellectual life of the Qing, much as the European Enlightenment challenged Christian orthodoxy in the eighteenth century or the "postmodern" rebellion challenged the received epistemology of the Enlightenment in the last decades of the twentieth century. As in the West, orthodoxy in China had its defenders. But so many of the best minds of the period were influenced by the new trends that they altered the perspectives of all. The historical irony is that rebellion against Song and Ming Confucianism began in a conservative and fundamentalist spirit – to recover the original meaning of the Classics. Indeed, this intellectual rebellion was entirely orthodox politically, seeking to put the new Qing dynasty on sounder footing by correcting the excesses of the Ming.

Yet in practice the evidential studies movement was literally deconstructive. Philological proofs showed how Song–Ming metaphysics were "contaminated"

by Daoist and Buddhist influences. That the classics, such as the seminal *Documents* or *History* (*Shangshu*) cited by Confucius, contained forgeries inserted into them later was demonstrated beyond refutation. Such questioning spread to other classics. The Han Learning scholars of the Qing tended to be professionally skeptical and rationalist, and the process of pruning away the historical accumulation of misinterpretation was potentially subversive. Where would it end? Indeed, the intellectual historian Benjamin Elman has suggested, "Han Learning represented more than just an antiquarian quest. Its advocates cast doubt on the Confucian ideology enshrined by Manchu rulers when they legitimated imperial power."[16] Above all, Han Learning historicized what had previously been the transcendental sacred. In showing that certain texts important to the broadly defined Confucian tradition – and central to imperial Confucianism specifically – contained forgeries, Han Learning raised doubts about the entire corpus. Moreover, in making philology something of a scientific method, the movement raised questions about objective standpoint. Confucianism had not faced such a serious challenge since the outside threat of Buddhism a thousand years earlier, even though the Han Learning scholars considered themselves true followers of Confucius.

In spite of its findings, the subversive potential of Han Learning mostly remained latent. One reason was that the majority of its adepts deliberately ignored the broader implications of their scholarship. Han Learning thus tended to bog down in philological trivia. Han Learning shared with the Cheng-Zhu mainstream both a respect for scholarship and a skepticism of utopian thinking. As a fairly technical art requiring years of specialized training, it encouraged skeptical more than speculative habits of mind. It abjured questions of morality and cosmology for more narrowly focused research concerns.

Eventually the pendulum swung back – but not exactly to the previous status quo. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a feeling that thoughtful people had better consider questions of morality and even metaphysics had become fairly widespread. In attacking the philosophy of the Song and Ming periods, the Qing's Han Learning had not really tried to replace it. The answers were still supposed to lie in the classics, as now better understood. But in fact the answers still had to come from *interpretation*, the kind of approach evidential studies by itself simply could not handle. One new approach was self-consciously synthetic: to combine the precise scholarship of Han Learning for textual questions but then to go on to use Song Learning as a guide to basic principles, especially in ethics. Precisely to the extent Han Learning had succeeded in rediscovering the words of the sages, the problem of how to make them relevant was accentuated.

In order to understand the real intellectual revolution of the late Qing, one other feature of evidential studies must be mentioned. The Han Learning scholars, in their pursuit of all the evidence from the most ancient times, rediscovered the philosophical debates of the Warring States era (fourth to third centuries BC). This was the period, of the generations following

Confucius, when competing schools against and within Confucianism were elaborated – some of which had been lost. Qing scholars discovered how to tease them out from the very partial documentary evidence available. In turn, some of these ideas from Mohist, Daoist, and Legalist traditions provided important resources for late Qing intellectuals. These new resources enriched the philosophical vocabulary. Suddenly, Chinese culture became more than Confucian orthodoxy.

Finally, the direct antecedent to Kang Youwei's philosophy, the "New Text" school, also arose out of Han Learning. The "New Text" versus "Old Text" controversy was originally an ancient one. Somewhat different versions of the classics – in two different writing styles – appeared in the Han dynasty when Confucianism was revived after the attempt of the Qin dynasty (221–6 BC) to eradicate it. "New Texts" referred to writings in the contemporary epigraphical style, written by contemporary scholars from memory, while "Old Text" versions written in pre-Han styles were allegedly discovered hidden in the walls of Confucius's old house. The Former Han (206 BC–AD 8) had favored New Text while Later Han (AD 25–220) scholars, after some debate, favored the Old Text versions (they had much in common but differed in a few features). By the Qing, the New Text school was long forgotten. The Han Learning school of the Qing had rediscovered this controversy and by the eighteenth century some, though by no means all, evidential studies scholars were denouncing the Old Text tradition as based on fabrication. Certainly, portions of Old Text classics were Han period forgeries, but the main point was not relatively small textual differences.

The substantive issue at stake was the image of Confucius. Confucius allegedly wrote or at least edited all of the classics. One of the briefest of these was the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, sparse court annals of Confucius's own small state of Lu. Various commentaries were attached to explain these annals, and of these the New Text school paid special attention to the *Gongyang* commentary. While Old Text commentaries pictured Confucius as a teacher whose greatness resided in his revival of ancient traditions, the *Gongyang* treated Confucius as the "uncrowned king" whose greatness lay in founding new institutions. The *Gongyang* Confucius was a charismatic, even mystical leader. The political point was that in orthodox Confucianism Confucius himself was safely dead: gentry might claim to be masters of sacred texts but they were bound to the status quo. But in New Text thinking Confucius became a living, disturbing presence: though never a king or even a prime minister, he had understood how to preserve Chinese culture in a time of turmoil, laid the foundation of the unitary empire, and even foreseen the future. Anyone who could speak in the name of this magical Confucius became a prophet or "sage" himself, and might in turn challenge the established order. New Text scholars found Han dynasty references to an evolutionary scheme of "three ages" – from "Chaos" to "Lesser Peace" to finally a "Great Peace" and unity. Such progressivism, however vague, supported a basically optimistic worldview and justified Kang Youwei's radical Confucianism.

Ideological revolution

Such esoteric debates about the nature of Confucius became politically important when the Qing's institutions began to fail. Late Qing political discourse was created as the cosmological kingship declined. With this background, then, we can see more precisely how Kang's ideas were truly radical and yet how they also had deep roots in Chinese culture. Kang saw himself not as a politician but as a charismatically endowed sage. His ultimate goal was a Confucian one influenced by Buddhist ethics: to lead all humankind to moral perfection. The scheme of the "three ages," made explicitly evolutionary in his thought, formed the pivot of that goal; ultimately, not just China but all humankind – indeed the entire natural world – would reach perfection.

Kang read widely in his youth, including translations of Western works, and was impressed by what he saw on a trip to the British colony of Hong Kong. Not personally tempted to become a Christian, he understood that Christianity was a great social force in the West. It therefore constituted both a threat to Chinese culture and a model for what Confucianism should be. By the 1880s he was urging the emperor (in those unread memorials) to make Confucianism into an established Church, like the Church of England. In itself, this was an extraordinary suggestion. Confucianism was a "Teaching" and, although surrounded by ritual and awe, it had never possessed a clergy or an ecclesiastic apparatus. But Kang thought a Confucian state Church could provide the common people with spiritual comfort and a value system. Kang thus saw a spiritual vacuum as the greatest threat to China. He often commented that the Jews had long ago lost their nation but kept their identity because of their religion, but a people that lost its identity had lost everything. Yet Kang himself contributed to the destruction of the sacred texts on which Han Learning had been dripping corrosive criticism for two hundred years.[17] Kang never quit trying to turn China into a Confucian state. Nor did he ever quit trying to make China into a constitutional or titular monarchy. From 1898 when he sought to reform the Qing, into the 1910s and 1920s when he sought to restore the Qing, Kang believed that China needed a symbolic head of state to hold things together while the polity was opened up below. A Confucian Church, however, would have meant a totally new set of relationships between the court, the gentry (a new priesthood?), and the common people.

We can thus say that Kang's purposes went beyond politics to an effort to make Confucianism the basis of China's national culture. In the 1890s, however, Kang's immediate interest lay in using New Text ideas to promote institutional innovation, which he made even more explicit with the publication of *Confucius as a Reformer* in 1897.[18] Kang's Confucius believed in steamships and railroads and Kang's Confucianism sanctioned institutional change. It called on the government to call on "good men" (as had the Donglin movement) and furthermore to institutionalize this in a parliament. However, if Confucius as an "uncrowned king" was still shocking to Kang's more conservative colleagues, a Confucius dedicated to political transformation seemed even

further beyond the pale. In putting reformist notions in a Confucian ideological framework, Kang took some of the sting out of their foreign associations. But he began with a religious view of Confucius. A passage in the introduction to *Confucius as a Reformer* links some of these issues:

> Heaven, having pity for the many afflictions suffered by the men who live on this great earth, caused the Black Emperor to send down his semen so as to create a being who would rescue the people from their troubles – a being of divine intelligence, who would be a sage-king, a teacher for his age, a bulwark for all men, and a religious leader for the whole world. Born as he was in the Age of Chaos, he proceeded on the basis of this disorder, to establish the pattern of the Three Ages, basing himself initially on those of his native state [of Lu], but stressing the idea of the one Great Community that would ultimately bind together all parts of the great earth, far and near, large and small.[19]

Politics and even culture were subsumed ultimately in Kang's larger cosmological framework. His scholarship was sloppy and his logic arbitrary, but his charismatic vision had great appeal for the generation coming of age in the late 1890s. He believed that humankind was progressing in linear fashion toward a utopian age he called the "great community." As early as the late 1880s Kang began to work out some of his ideas about the stages of human progress, though he continued to work on *The Great Community* for forty years.[20] He proclaimed that eventually a cosmopolitan world would emerge without nations, families or clans, or private property. The family would be replaced by alliances freely agreed to on an annual basis, between homosexuals as well as heterosexuals, while children were raised in public nurseries. This fantasy has struck many as the most un-Confucian notion ever espoused by this Confucian sage, but it represented a final state of human evolution when "family" was not so much abolished as extended to all humankind. World government would be based on republican and federal principles.

Kang's utopian scheme revolved around the Confucian value of *ren* (love, benevolence), which he extended by combining it with the basic goal of Mahayana Buddhism – to eliminate suffering – and the notion of universal love. His goal was to eliminate the differences between people, or to abolish institutions that supported the individual ego. It was ultimately the nature of the cosmos, according to Kang's metaphysics, that everything shares the same primal energy. He denied that gender, racial, and cultural differences in the end possessed any significance. Yet, at the same time, Kang accepted the racial analysis of the day, treating the "brown" and "black" races as genetically inferior to the "yellow" and "white" – in contrast to his unambiguous condemnation of discriminatory treatment of women. Kang led efforts to stamp out footbinding, and he educated his own daughters. But racial equality, he thought, would only come about by moving peoples of the equator to cooler, more salubrious climates and promoting miscegenation.

Still, utopia was one thing; present-day reality another. Kang refused to publish *The Great Community* in his lifetime, and the two levels of Kang's thought had little to do with each other. His ideas about institutional reform *now* and his ideas about a utopian *future* could have been written by two separate people. While Kang himself no doubt derived a good deal of comfort from reflecting that the world of the "Lesser Peace" he lived in was transitional between primitive chaos and the Great Community, he adamantly insisted that to attempt to build the institutions of the Great Community prematurely was to invite disaster. The institutional reforms he favored for China were eminently suitable to Lesser Peace: a constitutional order between the evils of autocratic despotism and the utopia of absolute democracy. His persistent opposition to republicanism stemmed from his commitment to his particular version of linear progress.

In sum, radical Confucianism failed to reform the Qing state. In fact, it acted to delegitimate the dynasty. Of course, outside pressures and the court's own incompetence also did much to destroy the Qing. The Qing's "New Policy" reforms came too little too late. It has been argued that in the long run they contributed to the rebuilding of the Chinese state, but the point here is that whatever the success of the Qing's reforms in their own terms, they tore at the delicate net that held the traditional system of politics and culture together. The Qing's abolition of the exam system in 1905, for example, immediately distressed the huge constituency of exam hopefuls. An ambitious village schoolteacher reacted to the news bitterly: "I woke at first light with my heart like dead ashes. I saw that all was vanity and there was nothing eternal … no one knows what will become of customs and morals …"[21]

Suddenly, culture was separated from politics; the classics were torn out of the bureaucratic system; and the court abandoned its role of providing political education. The questions asked in the exams had been a weapon of cultural control, and no new institutions were ready to provide this function. The traditional curriculum had reached down to village schools. The more expensive Western-style schools were only built in county seats. Thus one of the strands that bound elites to ordinary villagers was also broken. What had been a whole world of learning and truth was suddenly reduced to a minor subfield of a particular history.

The political and military powers of the court, the prestige and status of the gentry, the values and learning of the literati – these had once been three strong pillars supporting an apparently immovable system. The New Text school's reformism uprooted all three pillars. It criticised imperial despotism and traditional versions of classical learning. Yet it could not come to terms with the new nationalist and utilitarian values of the twentieth century.[22] The Qing and Confucianism were doomed together. Radical Confucianism might, possibly, have saved a more dynamic set of political leaders, but in the political reality of the late Qing it was too radical for the conservatives and not radical enough for the revolutionaries.