

**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.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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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.

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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. If you were the emperor and wanted to act on Chu's advice, what concrete steps would you take? What changes would you make?
5. Look at Chu's analysis of the sources of Qing weakness and the remedy that he suggests, and compare his ideas with those expressed by Kang Youwei in his 1898 memorial advocating reform and with the ideas expressed in the imperial government's reform edict of 1901.

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In the present world our trouble is not that we lack good institutions but that we lack upright minds. If we seek to reform institutions, we must first reform men's minds. Unless all men of ability assist each other, good laws become mere paper documents; unless those who supervise them are fair and enlightened, the venal will end up occupying the places of the worthy. ...

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; in order to protect our commercial rights, they organized the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company and cotton mills; in order to educate persons of talent, they founded the Tongwen College and other language schools; in order to strengthen training, they established naval and military academies. Countless other enterprises were inaugurated, and an annual expenditure amounting to millions was incurred. Truly no effort was spared in the attempt to establish new institutions after the pattern of the West.

When these enterprises were first undertaken, the regulations and systems were thoroughly considered so as to attain the best. It was asserted then that although China at the outset had to imitate the superior techniques of the West, eventually she would surpass the

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Western countries. But [in fact] perfunctory execution of these reforms has 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.

In some cases the authorities knew only how to indulge in empty talk; in other cases the officials succeeding those who originated the reforms gradually became lax and let the projects drop. Generally the initial effort was seldom maintained to the end; and while there was much talk, there was little action. ... If the proposals had been carried out gradually and persistently, China would have long ago become invincible. But these far-reaching plans failed because we only put up an ostentatious façade behind which were concealed the avarice and selfishness [of the officials].

In order to create a new impression in the country and to stimulate the lax morale of the people, it is necessary to distinguish between meritorious and unworthy men and to order rewards and punishments accordingly. ... If this fundamental remedy is adopted, the raising of funds will bring in abundant revenues, and the training of troops will result in a strong army. Institutions that are good will achieve results day by day, while institutions that are not so good can be changed to bring out their maximum usefulness. Otherwise, profit-seeking opportunists will vie with each other in proposing novel theories ... and there will be no limit to their evil doings.

As to the present institutions and laws, although in name they adhere to past formulations "respectfully observed," in fact they have lost the essence of their original meaning. If we cling to the vestiges of the past, it will be conforming to externals while departing from the spirit. But if we get at the root, a single change can lead to complete fulfillment of the Way. ... We should, therefore, make the necessary adjustments in accordance with the needs of the time. 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.