

**EXCERPTS FROM COMPREHENSIVE CONSIDERATION 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.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from Comprehensive Consideration of the Whole Situation
By Kang Youwei

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.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on
EXCERPTS FROM COMPREHENSIVE CONSIDERATION OF THE WHOLE SITUATION, BY KANG YOUWEI**

...

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.

Questions:

1. What factors does Kang Youwei point to as causes of the Qing empire's weakness?
2. What kind of reform measures might reasonably follow from Kang's analysis of the causes of the empire's weakness?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. Compare Kang's analyses of the causes of weakness and the need for reform with the analyses and ideas set forth in the imperial government's edict of 1901 calling for reform.

Longer Selection

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A survey of all states in the world will show that those states that undertook reforms became strong while those states that clung to the past perished. The consequences of clinging to the past and the effects of opening up new ways are thus obvious. If Your Majesty, with your discerning brilliance, observes the trends in other countries, you will see that if we can change, we can preserve ourselves; but if we cannot change, we shall perish. Indeed, if we can make a complete change, we shall become strong, but if we only make limited changes, we shall still perish. If Your Majesty and his ministers investigate the source of the disease, you will know that this is the right prescription.

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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. This can only result in having a fever or getting oneself drowned. ...

It is a principle of things that the new is strong but the old weak; that new things are fresh but old things rotten; that new things are active but old things static. If the institutions are old, defects will develop. Therefore there are no institutions that should remain unchanged for a hundred years. Moreover, our present institutions are but unworthy vestiges of the Han, Tang, Yuan, and Ming dynasties; they are not even the institutions of the [Manchu] ancestors. In fact, they are the products of the fancy writing and corrupt dealing of petty officials rather than the original ideas of the ancestors. To say that they are the ancestral institutions is an insult to the ancestors. Furthermore, institutions are for the purpose of preserving one's territories. Now that the ancestral territory cannot be preserved, what good is it to maintain the ancestral institutions? ...

Although there is a desire to reform, yet if the national policy is not fixed and public opinion not united, it will be impossible for us to give up the old and adopt the new. The national policy is to the state just as the rudder is to the boat or the pointer is to the compass. It determines the direction of the state and shapes the public opinion of the country.

Nowadays the court has been undertaking some reforms, but the action of the emperor is obstructed by the ministers, and the recommendations of the able scholars are attacked by old-fashioned bureaucrats. If the charge is not "using barbarian ways to change China," then it is "upsetting the ancestral institutions." Rumors and scandals are rampant, and people fight each other like fire and water. To reform in this way is as ineffective as attempting a forward march by walking backward. It will inevitably result in failure. Your Majesty knows that under the present circumstances reforms are imperative and old institutions must be abolished. I beg Your Majesty to make up your mind and to decide on the national policy. After the fundamental policy is determined, the methods of implementation must vary according to what is primary and what is secondary, what is important and what is insignificant, what is strong and what is weak, what is urgent and what can wait. ... If anything goes wrong, no success can be achieved.

After studying ancient and modern institutions, Chinese and foreign, I have found that the institutions of the sage kings and Three dynasties [of Xia, Shang, and Zhou] were excellent, but that ancient times were different from today. I hope Your Majesty will daily read Mencius and follow his example of loving the people. The development of the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties may be learned, but it should be remembered that the age of universal unification is different from that of sovereign nations. I wish Your Majesty would study *Guanzi*¹ and follow his idea of managing the country. As to the republican governments of the United

¹ Early book on political and economic institutions that foreshadows Legalist doctrine.

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States and France and the constitutional governments of Britain and Germany, these countries are far away and their customs are different from ours. Their changes occurred a long time ago and can no longer be traced. Consequently 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. The time and place of Japan's reform are not remote and her religion and customs are somewhat similar to ours. Her success is manifest; her example can be easily followed.