

REFORM EDICT OF THE QING IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT (JANUARY 29, 1901)

Introduction

In the wake of the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901) and the catastrophic foreign intervention that that movement precipitated, the imperial government reconsidered the need for fundamental reforms. Government reform had already been attempted, and rejected, in 1898 when Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and his colleagues temporarily ran the imperial government, with the support of the Guangxu Emperor (1871-1908, r. 1875-1908), until the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) ousted them.

A mere three years later, however, the Empress Dowager issued the edict below.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Reform Edict of the Qing Imperial Government (January 29, 1901)

Certain principles of morality (*changqing*) are immutable, whereas methods of governance (*zhifa*) have always been mutable. The *Classic of Changes* states that “when a measure has lost effective force, the time has come to change it.” And the *Analects* states that “the Shang and Zhou dynasties took away from and added to the regulations of their predecessors, as can readily be known.”

...

We have now received Her Majesty’s decree to devote ourselves fully to China’s revitalization, to suppress vigorously the use of the terms *new* and *old*, and to blend together the best of what is Chinese and what is foreign. The root of China’s weakness lies in harmful habits too firmly entrenched, in rules and regulations too minutely drawn, in the overabundance of inept and mediocre officials and in the paucity of truly outstanding ones, in petty bureaucrats who hide behind the written word and in clerks and yamen runners who use the written word as talismans to acquire personal fortunes, in the mountains of correspondence between government offices that have no relationship to reality, and in the seniority system and associated practices that block the way of men of real talent.

...

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on
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The first essential, even more important than devising new systems of governance (*zhifa*) is to secure men who govern well (*zhi ren*). Without new systems, the corrupted old system cannot be salvaged; without men of ability, even good systems cannot be made to succeed.

Questions:

1. How does the imperial government justify the concept of administrative reform? Why is it necessary to use that particular argument?
2. How do the imperial officials analyze the causes of the Qing empire's weakness? What factors do they point to as causes for that weakness?
3. Given the government's analysis of the causes of Qing weakness, what kind of reform measures would you expect the government to pursue in order to address those causes?
4. Are there causes for the Qing empire's weakness that the government does not mention? If so, how would mention of those causes change the envisioned strategy for reform?
5. Compare the analysis of the Qing's problems, the justification for reform, and the possible directions of reform indicated in this reform edict of 1901 with the analysis, justifications, and possible directions for reform indicated in Kang Youwei's memorial on reform submitted on January 29, 1898.

Longer Selection

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(January 29, 1901)**

Certain principles of morality (*changjing*) are immutable, whereas methods of governance (*zhifa*) have always been mutable. The *Classic of Changes* states that "when a measure has lost effective force, the time has come to change it." And the *Analects* states that "the Shang and Zhou dynasties took away from and added to the regulations of their predecessors, as can readily be known."

Now, the Three Mainstays (Bonds) [ruler/minister, parent/child, and husband/ wife] and the Five Constant Virtues [humaneness, rightness, ritual decorum, wisdom, and trustworthiness] remain forever fixed and unchanging, just as the sun and the stars shine steadfastly upon the earth. ...

Throughout the ages, successive generations have introduced new ways and abolished the obsolete. Our own august ancestors set up new systems to meet the requirements of the day.

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... Laws and methods (*fa*) become obsolete and, once obsolete, require revision in order to serve their intended purpose of strengthening the state and benefiting the people. ...

It is well known that the new laws propounded by the Kang rebels were less reform laws (*bianfa*) than lawlessness (*luanfa*). These rebels took advantage of the court's weakened condition to plot sedition. It was only by an appeal to the Empress Dowager to resume the reins of power that the court was saved from immediate peril and the evil rooted out in a single day. How can anyone say that in suppressing this insurrectionary movement the Empress Dowager declined to sanction anything new? Or that in taking away from and adding to the laws of our ancestors, we advocated a complete abolition of the old? We sought to steer a middle course between the two extremes and to follow a path to good administration. Officials and the people alike must know that mother and son [the Empress Dowager and the Guangxu emperor] were activated by one and the same motive.

We have now received Her Majesty's decree to devote ourselves fully to China's revitalization, to suppress vigorously the use of the terms *new* and *old*, and to blend together the best of what is Chinese and what is foreign. The root of China's weakness lies in harmful habits too firmly entrenched, in rules and regulations too minutely drawn, in the overabundance of inept and mediocre officials and in the paucity of truly outstanding ones, in petty bureaucrats who hide behind the written word and in clerks and yamen runners who use the written word as talismans to acquire personal fortunes, in the mountains of correspondence between government offices that have no relationship to reality, and in the seniority system and associated practices that block the way of men of real talent. The curse of our country (Ch. *guojia*, J. *kokka*) lies in the one word *si*, or "private advantage"; the ruin of our realm lies in the one word *li*, or "narrow precedent."

Those who have studied Western methods up to now have confined themselves to the spoken and written languages and to weapons and machinery. These are but surface elements of the West and have nothing to do with the essentials of Western learning. Our Chinese counterparts to the fundamental principles upon which Western wealth and power are based are the following precepts, handed down by our ancestors: "to hold high office and show generosity to others," "to exercise liberal forbearance over subordinates," "to speak with sincerity," and "to carry out one's purpose with diligence." But China has neglected such deeper dimensions of the West and contents itself with learning a word here and a phrase there, a skill here and a craft there, meanwhile hanging on to old corrupt practices of currying favor to benefit oneself. If China disregards the essentials of Western learning and merely confines its studies to surface elements that themselves are not even mastered, how can it possibly achieve wealth and power?

To sum up, administrative methods and regulations must be revised and abuses eradicated. If regeneration is truly desired, there must be quiet and reasoned deliberation.

We therefore call upon the members of the Grand Council, the Grand Secretaries, the Six Boards and Nine Ministries, our ministers abroad, and the governors-general and governors of the provinces to reflect carefully on our present sad state of affairs and to scrutinize Chinese

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and Western governmental systems with regard to all dynastic regulations, state administration, official affairs, matters related to people's livelihood (*minsheng*), modern schools, systems of examination, military organization, and financial administration. Duly weigh what should be kept and what abolished, what new methods should be adopted and what old ones retained. By every available means of knowledge and observation, seek out how to renew our national strength, how to produce men of real talent, how to expand state revenues and how to revitalize the military. ...

The first essential, even more important than devising new systems of governance (*zhifa*), is to secure men who govern well (*zhi ren*). Without new systems, the corrupted old system cannot be salvaged; without men of ability, even good systems cannot be made to succeed. ... Once the appropriate reforms are introduced to clear away abuses, it will be more than ever necessary to select upright and capable men to discharge the functions of office. Everyone, high and low: take heed!

The Empress Dowager and we have long pondered these matters. Now things are at a crisis point where change must occur, to transform weakness into strength. Everything depends upon how the change is effected.