

The Chinese Revolution

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Why did the Chinese Revolution break out in 1911?

1 Long Term Factors

1.1 Dynastic Cycle

The Qing government adopted Confucianism as its governing philosophy. Confucianism promoted the presence of a social system, as well as order in a country. There were also concepts of harmony and etiquette. According to Confucian ideologies, it is understood, during the Qing Dynasty, that the main purpose of the society and governance is to maintain harmony through hierarchy, which refers to the social system. This meant that the Emperor had the Mandate of Heaven and that his subjects and officials, had to obey him. Moreover, the officials are able to achieve their status and rank through their training in Confucian learning. This shows that the way the people in China perceived the world was completely dominated by Confucianism. The ability to achieve status and rank through training in Confucian learning was implemented with an aim to achieve a static harmonious world.

1.2 Opium Wars

China was defeated by the West in both opium wars. This defeat forced the opening up of China and exposed China as a technologically and military backward country. It then led to what was known as the Century of Humiliation, where China was subject to exploitation by Western powers. Moreover, the Qing government had to pay a large sum of indemnity, open up more ports to foreigners and cede Hong Kong to Britain. Through its defeat in the opium wars, the Qing government realised that China must change in order to survive in the modern world. They believed that China needed Western technology and science to counter Western military strength.

China's defeat in the opium wars eroded the prestige and legitimacy of the Qing government to rule China. It showed the people in China that the Qing government was incapable of defending China and that China was a technologically and military backward country. It resulted in the people's loss of trust in the Qing government and military in protecting them, shedding light on the Qing government's incompetence. The defeat in opium wars resulted in unequal treaties forced upon China ; it also symbolises Western powers' dominance over China.

1.3 Han Nationalism

The Qing Dynasty was ruled by the Manchus, who adopted Confucianism as a governing philosophy. In an effort to defend its language and identity, the Manchus brutally oppress the Han Chinese. The Manchus fear that the Han Chinese could be a potential threat to their rule and power, hence suppressing them as much as possible. This shows that the Manchus favour fellow Manchus over their Han counterparts in Imperial government. The Manchus oppress Han Chinese brutally, in order to show Manchu domination. Hence, due to the Manchus' unfair treatment towards the Han Chinese, the Han Chinese resisted the Manchu. This paved the way for the Chinese Revolution and for more tension to arise.

1.4 Middle Kingdom Mentality

China viewed itself as the kingdom at the centre of the world, politically and culturally. China, in Chinese, reflects this idea. Hence, the Emperor of China was the ruler of “All under Heaven”. There was a perception that China did not have anything to learn from the outside world, resulting in it being somewhat isolated. There was little communication and contact with people from other countries, apart from when the West went over to China. As a result, there was a general idea that the world revolves around China. Hence, when Qing China suffered a brutal defeat in the opium wars, it came as a surprise to the Qing government. The people in China, including the government, had been too complacent, before the opium wars and rebellions. Hence, this paved the way for the Chinese Revolution, as the locals found that Qing China was not as strong as it was portrayed and thought to be; they felt threatened and felt that change was needed, in order for China to regain its strength and power.

1.5 Conclusion

Adopting Confucianism as a governing philosophy and the presence of the Middle Kingdom mentality resulted in the Chinese being too complacent. Because of that, they lost out in terms of technology and economic progress, as compared to the Western powers. This resulted in them being relatively weak as compared to Western powers. This can also be seen in their brutal defeat in the opium wars, as well as their weaponry and vehicles. There was a clear difference in the quality of the materials used for building the vehicles such as boats, and the ability of weaponry such as guns. This resulted in the Western powers being at an advantage, causing the Qing China to suffer a total defeat.

Secondly, the Chinese society was divided into two, namely the ruling elites, which are the Manchus, and the Han Chinese. This social divide was present even at the time where the Western powers were posing a great threat to the survivability of Qing China. It further weakened China’s ability to pushback, as the society was not united, but rather divided.

Moreover, the Han Nationalism was the key driving force that set the foundations for the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty. This is because Western Imperialism eroded the legitimacy of the Qing government to govern China, in the eyes of the Han Chinese. It hence paved the way for revolutionary ideas to spread within the society and for the Chinese Revolution to eventually take place.

Lastly, Confucianism and Autocracy kept the people on a tight leash, resulting in them being unable to learn about the outside world, science and technology. This put Qing China at a great disadvantage when there were clashes with the Western powers. With the limited amount of knowledge in the field of Science and technology, Qing China was unable to make advancements and progress alongside that of the outside world. Therefore, their weaponry and boats were of very limited capacity and ability, as compared to that of the Western powers, putting them at a great disadvantage, threatening the survivability of China. This paved the way for revolutionary ideas to brew and for ideas that change was needed to spark. Ultimately, this built the foundation of the Chinese Revolution.

2 Short Term Factors

2.1 Taiping Rebellion [1850 – 1864]

The Taiping Rebellion was led by Hong Xiuquan. It was influenced by Christian missionaries. The Taiping Rebellion aimed to achieve several things such as the equality of all men and women, end of opium smoking, end of poverty, corruption and foreign Manchu rule. It aimed to provide public education, to transform China to an industrial nation. The Taiping Rebellion stirred revolutionary ideas and ideas that change was necessary amongst the people. It was a civil war, with lots of bloodshed on both sides, namely the Han Chinese and the Manchus. This resulted in internal turmoil, which led the people to question whether the Manchus, or rather the Qing government, really had the right to rule. With the Western powers already exerting pressure on the Qing government, the growing internal turmoil piled more pressure onto the Qing government, pushing the

Qing government close to the edge of the cliff. It was hence a short-term factor of the Chinese Revolution as it paved the way for more uprisings to take place.

2.2 Self-Strengthening Movement [1861 – 1895]

2.2.1 Tongzhi Restoration [1861 – 1875]

In order to strengthen China, the Tongzhi Restoration took place. There were two components to be taken care of. Firstly, the problem of corruption needed to be resolved. It was then perceived that Qing China was defeated in the opium wars due to corruption and the loss of morals of officials. In order to solve this issue, there needs to be an abolishment of corruption and to restore the morals of officials, according to proper Confucianism ideologies. Secondly, China needed to learn and adapt to the Western technology and science, in order to resist and fend off the predatory West. Moreover, China also needed to engage in trade activities with the West, as well as participate in international diplomacy, in order to strengthen relations between countries, to prevent Westerners from fighting for a piece of China, all at once.

2.2.2 Failure of Self-Strengthening Movement

During the Self-Strengthening Movement, there were some improvements, in terms of military modernisation. For example, China's first modern fleet, the Beiyang Navy, was created. However, there were more limitations than successes. This is because the Self-Strengthening Movement only did a respite, but not strengthen China. The government was still corrupted and even though there was some form of military modernisation, China fell further behind the Western powers in terms of technological innovations by the end of the 20th century. This is a result of the Self-Strengthening Movement being too focused on military modernisation, hence it was limited in scope. In conclusion, the failure of the Self-Strengthening Movement only proved to the people in China that the Qing government was incapable and lacked competency. It could have been viewed as an attempt by the Manchu rulers to fend off the predatory West, in order to maintain their

rule of China. Under the strict Confucian governing philosophy, the people in China could not be mobilised to modernise, contributing to its failure. Hence, the failure of the Self-Strengthening Movement led to the Chinese Revolution in the short-term as increasing amount of people in China were fed up with the system and the repeated failure of the Qing government in strengthening China.

2.3 100 Days Reform

The 100 Days Reform had certain goals in mind. These goals involved minimising the emphasis on Confucianism and increasing emphasis on more technical areas such as math, science and technology. It also included a change in government structure, from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. This can also be seen as a move away from Confucianism as Confucianism promoted the idea of harmony through social hierarchy. Next, modernising China's military and adopting modern training and drill methods. This would better prepare the people in China for the battlefield, especially with the Western powers. Lastly, the rapid industrialisation of all aspects of China, through manufacturing, commerce and capitalism. The reformers announced that China needed deep systematic and ideological changes in governance, coupled with innovation. Due to the fact that Confucianism was too restrictive, a move away from Confucianism would be beneficial in allowing the people in China to be more innovative and open to gaining more knowledge in the field of science and technology.

2.3.1 Failure of the 100 Days Reform

The failure of the 100 Days Reform contributed to the Chinese Revolution in the short-term. The 100 Days Reform was shut down as it threatened the vital interests of both the Manchu and Han officials. Since it focused a lot on reducing the emphasis of Confucianism, it posed a threat to the entire Confucian intelligentsia. It also threatened the power of Empress Dowager Cixi. Hence, the Qing government and Cixi were not supportive of the 100 Days Reform and were strongly against it. Because of that, the Arch-Conservative

and anti-Western forces were dominant from 1898 to 1901. This resulted in the further weakening of China. Moreover, chances of establishing constitutional monarchy were now slashed. Therefore, the failure of the 100 Days Reform caused the people to become restless and increasingly frustrated due to the fact that there were hopes of changes that would bring about benefits to the whole of China. However, due to its failure, such ideals would not be achieved. The people were then let down again and again. This paved the way for more pent up frustration and anger and eventually, the Chinese Revolution.

3 Trigger Factors

3.1 Boxer Rebellion

The Boxer Protocol was signed in 1901, formally declaring the end of the Boxer Rebellion. Harsh consequences included China having to pay huge sums of money in reparations. Arsenals and fortifications were destroyed and foreign troops were stationed permanently in and around Beijing. With that, the Western powers kept the Qing government in power and did not install a new Chinese government. This arrangement allowed them to rule China indirectly, with the Qing government merely becoming its puppets. This shows that China was already at the stage whereby any changes made would be too late and there was a high possibility of the Qing government collapsing. Furthermore, the exploitation of China continued without possible chaos or wars that might have broke out and disrupted the trade in China. This triggered the Chinese Revolution as it was made clear that if the people in China do not take action themselves, there would not be any changes made to the government and the state of China would not improve.

3.2 Revolutionary Movements

After preserving the social structure and absolute monarchy for the longest time, the Qing government finally attempted systemic reforms in the government in 1901, which included establishing a constitutional monarchy. However, the reforms were too slow paced and a

little too late. Hence, this shows that the systemic reforms were somewhat ineffective due to the fact that it was too slow paced and came in too late. By then, the state of the Qing government and China was already beyond repair. Hence, this would trigger the Chinese Revolution as yet another reform would prove to be useless not long after. It added onto the pent-up frustrations of the people, which would eventually spill out, resulting in the Chinese Revolution. Moreover, during that point of time, Sun Yat Sen and the Tong Meng Hui believed that China could not modernise unless it became a republic. Hence, with Sun Yat Sen promoting his revolutionary ideals, proposing an alternative to the Mandate of Heaven system with more Western democracy, the people were convinced that a revolution would bring out the betterment of China, especially if it became a republic. Hence, they began to rally around his cause, eventually leading up to the Chinese Revolution.

3.3 Wuchang Uprising [10 Oct 1911]

The Wuchang Uprising was sparked off by a bomb going off accidentally. It resulted in the revolutionaries launching their uprising prematurely. Due to rising support for revolutions in the Qing armies, the uprising was successful after many failed attempts. Within a short time frame, majority of the provinces had declared independence from the Qing, joining the side of the revolution. As more and more people joined the side of the revolutionaries, including people in the armies, the end of the rule of the Qing government drew nearer and nearer. It directly sparked off the Chinese Revolution, as more and more people rallied with the revolutionaries. Due to the fact that the Wuchang Uprising was unexpected, the Qing government failed to respond swiftly to the uprising. Hence, as more people leaned on the side of republicanism and the side of the revolutionaries, it directly triggered the Chinese Revolution of 1911.