

The Disintegration of the Qing Empire

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Abstract: By examining specific people and case studies of the legal, medical, and education system in Late Qing, this paper argues that a system of foreign imperial ideas, a western-centric ideology which favored the linear progression towards modernity, contributed to the downfall of the monarchic Manchu Regime. These specific examples include books, *Lidai Shilue* and *Lishi Jiaokeshu*, the infamous sanitary reform in Tianjin and the implementation of American law.

Keywords: Qing empire; disintegration.

1. Introduction

Before my formal presentation of the subject, I would like to clarify the meaning of western imperial ideas in history by illustrating some examples. First, these ideas include flagshipping the notion of nation-state as an ultimate objective for social development as well as presenting the rise of a nation-state as the dawn of modernity for the particular region. And these ideas are embedded within literature and thoughts including Zou Rong's advocacy of a peaceful revolution towards a civilized nation-state[1]. Second, this event also involves the start of the new human consciousness which revolves around the figure of the nation-state as the culmination and embodiment of a community that transcends locality. Furthermore, national identity cannot be found in a world of tradition and it is born with a process called modernization where European scientific and industrial revolution transformed the politics, society and other worldviews. Lastly, the nation-state and modernization are often regarded as the inevitable product of history which itself is characterized by linear causation[2]. Hence in this essay, it will try to identify some of the cases of adopting this kind of thinking and discuss how it undermined the Qing empire.

2. Chronological Rearrangement and Shared Ancestry

In 1904, an important document known as the *Zouding xuetao zhangcheng* which was fundamental in the Late Qing educational reform elaborated the goals and the expected outcomes of the different levels of schools including primary, junior, high schools and universities. What's most important is that it established a new school system that was no longer associated with the civil service examinations which announced the death of the old tradition. This section examines the new history textbooks that were written and designed after the reform to see how imperial ideas of modernity and progress were adopted in this process and how they affected the Qing regime. A close analysis of a history book called *Lidai shilue*, which was written by Liu Yizheng is at priority here while the significance of this book was highlighted due to the fact that it was published and promoted by the Qing government. Produced in the famous Jiangchu shuju at Nanjing in 1902, *Lidai shilue* was an attempt to mimic the Japanese educational model of the Meiji reform after the defeat of the Sino-Japanese war. The author of the book, Liu Yizheng was a protege of a famous philologist Miao

Quansu and after his mission of learning the Japanese education system he wrote his book based upon Naka Michiyo's *Shina tsushi*. While translation and adaptation may be regarded as easy work, it is important to note that Liu adopted the Western style of periodization where he divided Chinese history into, modern, medieval and ancient, three parts. To be more specific, The ancient period covered from the Xia dynasty to the Qing dynasty. The medieval period ranged from the Han dynasty to the Tang dynasty. And finally the current period covered from the Song dynasty to the Ming dynasty. His justification for the tripartite periodization was written at the start of his book under the title The purpose of History. There, by comparing the two historical genres where one focused on the thousands of years of history and the other one focused on a particular dynasty, he preferred a general view of history by looking at the long span of time and argued that its purpose was not to serve the ruling class or educated elites, rather to promote young people's understanding of the link between past and present. The phrasing of this historical genre may be confusing for contemporary readers, so to put it more simply, this type of writing is similar to present day national history. Liu emphasized on four major characteristics including understanding foreign relations, the importance of territorial boundaries, the discussion of the structure of government as well as the summary of thought and ideas. While it was not explicitly stated, these ideas were fundamental to every citizen in a nation-state. Even Liu admitted that the most optimal way to understand these four characteristics was to absorb the western tripartite periodization. Clearly, the example of Liu yizheng reflected several major problems in the Late imperial Qing and the first was the crippling of the existing systems and ideology. The old examination system was no longer in use and the void it created was susceptible to infiltration of a certain ideology which I will discuss more in the next paragraph. Another important feature of this reform was the unconscious subjugation of the Qing scholars to the western standards and imperial powers.

With the power dynamics tilting heavily towards foreign and new ideas, the following example of Liu Shipei's history textbooks provided us insights regarding how these ideas constructed a narrative that did not favor the Qing dynasty. Liu Shipei's *Zhongguo lishi jiaokeshu*, unlike the previous history textbook, took a different route where it sought its ideas from ancient times as early as the Western Zhou period. Liu was certainly enthusiastic about the idea of the alleged western origin of the early Chinese civilization which was

first written by Terrien de Lacouperic in London. It was proposed that the Chinese civilization migrated from Mesopotamia after the founding of archaeological discoveries in West Asia that linked to Chinese classical texts. Consequently, in his textbook, Liu directly advocated for equality and balance of power since it was a shared idea of the Chinese and Europeans dating back to ancient histories. With the support of European political structure and ideas of check and balance, Liu argued that the western Zhou dynasty possessed similar political structure where the King, jun, possessed both the administrative and legislative power, but was ultimately restricted by popular support. Thus, for Liu, the ultimate political authority was not determined by the king, but in the people which was characterized by the Chinese character, qun, which means a flock of sheep following their leaders. Liu's interpretation of this fluid understanding of the rulers and the ruled had many political implications on the political structure of the Late Qing. While he did not directly comment on Qing, he inspired and encouraged young people to explore what an ideal government would look like. And this was particularly important for local mobilization to actively rebel against the existing system.

In the reform of the education system, although the working of imperial thinking and ideology was a passive contributor, we could clearly see how influenced Chinese scholars were eager to forgo the traditional way of thinking and utilize the western mode of thinking without hesitation and the ideas of equality and balance of power and the nation-state ultimately came to undermine the rule of the Qing empire [3].

3. Sanitary Reform

In this next example, this paper attempts to analyze how foreign powers utilized the idea of sanitary, weisheng, as a tool for establishing control and exerting power under the Tianjin Provisional Government. After the defeat of the Qing troops, Tianjin was quickly taken over by foreign troops where they established the TPG to consolidate their control. The TPG was formed at a time when the germ theory of disease established hegemony and tropical medicine emerged. With the discovery of latent bacteria in the blood cells of people, and other experiments of the immune system, the focus of the containing disease spreading went from the environment to the individuals. According to Warwick Anderson, under the colonial context, the bodies and behaviors of the colonized became the objects of medical scrutiny and regulations with the development of modern medicine. Although methods of public health management did not necessarily change for the administrations as they cleaned streets, buried corpses as well as cleared out sewers, they also invaded the personal lives of the individuals in unprecedented ways for reasons unimaginable.

Rather than employing any direct political means to discipline the Tianjin people. Sanitation work was quickly utilized by TPG for punishment towards those transgressors and was successful in maintaining the order of the city. When people did not obey the rules and were arrested, these prisoners often had to cut off their queue and shave off their head. On top of that, they were required to wear half blue and half red uniforms with characters of Weisheng. People of multiple hierarchies of class and race were involved in the event including scholars and degree holders who were stripped off of their robes and were forced to kneel down. Apart from this, the regulation towards an intimate

physiological phenomenon that was excretion was also enforced strictly. A story of a fifteen years old showcased how he was forced at gunpoint to pick up and remove his feces with his hands in the city. He had no choice but to pick up with his hands and do as ordered, but after his hands were covered with filthy objects, the enforcer laughed and ran away. Apart from corporal punishment, the story of the young kids reflected working of a western ideology where the prerequisite of civilization and modernity which was embraced around the globe was personal hygiene and public health. And those who were incapable of maintaining these standards were discriminated against and were not deemed as human.

Since it would certainly be inefficient for the strategy of Weisheng to work continuously in Tianjin as an unmitigated tyranny, many Chinese elites found ways of adapting and working within this new political order by adopting to their philosophy. For many of the Tianjin elites, many of their lives were undisturbed by the foreign intrusion as they had access to their own cemetery and personal services, they even praised the new regulations. Some Tianjin elites even found occupations that had greater access to foreigners and foreign knowledge, especially the Japanese whom they have been actively studying ever since the Sino-Japanese war. For example, an educator named Yan Xiu hosted a dozen of Japanese guests in his home during the occupation year where they indulge in discussions of tea, martial art, modernity and education as well as works of calligraphy. Unsurprisingly, these Tianjin elites expressed their gratitude and approval of the TPG government as they controlled garbage collection, traffic duties. While many elites were criticized for lack of race consciousness, many of them like Hua Xuelai, however, understood the nature of imperialism quite well. Although it was a tragedy, they understood the violence of the foreign invasions in North China as a necessary mean to pull China out of its primitive culture. The aftermath of the Boxer rebellion combined with arrival of the scientific alternative way of the western model contributed immensely to labeling the Chinese cosmological models as superstition and calling for a reconstruction of the unscientific Chinese tradition. The significance of the TPG lay in the fundamental logic behind its policies which abided the process of modernization. The working of sanitization was beyond a policy that enforced citizens to remain clean and organized, it also introduced Chinese to a new way of imperial thinking which was drastically different. And ultimately, many people including the elites willingly accepted the dominance of western ideology in order to seek a different path for themselves.

Apart from the political movements in Tianjin, by gazing through the lens of the institutionalization of western medicine in China, we could also trace the gradual adaptation of western ideology which viewed western medicine as progressive and modern. After the establishment of several medical associations in China many of the doctors were viewed so highly that they refused to work with anyone who held a less prestigious degree. For example, the first National Medical Association was only open to doctors who attended foreign-run medical schools in China. And those who acquired their degrees in a Chinese based school could only acquire a lesser membership. Wu Lien-teh who gained national popularity through his contribution in the Manchurian plague epidemic voiced against non-standardized medical schools. Although his attempt to strengthen the Chinese nation through improving medical

schools was admirable, his adoption of the western modes of thinking nevertheless, stepped into the structure of hierarchy which was associated with racial inferiority [4].

Politically, Tianjin remained a fragmented city for a very long time where the colonial masters including Britain, Italy, Japan, Russia and more occupied a large amount of land on both sides of the central river. The city and its citizens would not see a drastic change even if there was no direct control established by any foreign powers. Since Qing's government was incapable of maintaining the foreign sanitary standards, Tianjin and other treaty ports would continue to be exploited. This meant that Qing was not accepted internationally as a modernized nation-state. Qing's political struggle was greatly connected to the Tianjin incident where the failure of meeting the expectations of the TPG and foreign sanitary standards signaled that the Qing's rule could not be reestablished [5].

4. Lawless Land

By examining Kang Youwei's words, we may gain some insights on how Qing scholars attempted to rescue the empire and conduct reforms and what their assumptions of the world were. By turning to the section about Democracy, we can find that Kang Youwei first stated that the founding of the United States was a revolution and the rise of democracy. He then expressed his desire of living in a world with only one government. However, I found something particularly interesting where he mentioned that he specifically stressed the importance of law for revolutions, democracy and equality [6]. Although utopian desires may not be the effect of imperial thinking, situating the law, in this case specifically the American legal system as the founding principles of a desired society, requires attention. On top of that, his next section draws attention to the familial ties in Chinese society where he called to abolish the Chinese family as they blocked the way for equality and peace. Ruskola discussed the effect of Legal Orientalism in his book where he argued that there is a common misconception that China is a lawless place under the unidirectional interpretation of the American system. For different polities, different forms of law existed and for China, the most significant form of law was the ones that existed in familial relationships. Consequently, we can see Kang Youwei's statement as the aftermath of the establishment of the U.S centric law system where Chinese law and Chinese society were greatly exploited.

European states at first did not regard the East Asia diplomatic institutions as real international legal order. Hence after the First Opium War, China was involuntarily absorbed into the Euro-American international law system where it was caught by several unequal treaties. With an unrecognized legal system, China was incapable of negotiating any treaties

that in 1844, with the presence of the U.S naval forces, the Qing empire was forced to enter the Treaty of Peace where China was obligated to allow any American citizens to trade in Canton and four other ports. This not only established the precedent that Americans in China were only subject to the laws of the United States, but also acted as a framework for the overall U.S and other states of Asia. Thus, the western legal framework constituted how people perceive law and the society in only an Eurocentric way which ultimately challenged the Qing regime [7].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, after careful analysis of the education, medical as well as the legal systems of the late imperial Qing, I conclude that western imperial thinking contributed greatly to the downfall of the empire. In the making of history textbooks, heavily influenced by imperial history, scholars looked towards other possibilities of constructing timelines and other possibilities of ancient history. In the medical field, ideas of modernity were used directly to exert control over people and their understanding of the world. Elites even actively facilitated the process of imperialism by facilitating the process. And finally, the legal system including international law excluded China altogether and formed a misconception of Qing as a lawless land.

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