

## Joshua Ong 6.11

### Why did China fail to modernise effectively between 1861 and 1894?

In the face of foreign imperialism and domestic challenges, the Qing court and provincial leaders sought to strengthen China through modernisation, through the self-strengthening movement which lasted from 1861 to 1894. By that time, China had already experienced defeats in the Opium Wars against technologically-superior British and French forces, while from within the Qing court had faced several rebellions, including the Taiping Rebellion, which was devastating, resulting in over 30 million dead. Only with Western help and technology was the Qing able to suppress the Taiping in 1864. Thus acquiring Western technology was seen as the key to strengthening China, and under provincial leaders, the self-strengthening movement had its successes, which is why John Fairbank calls the movement the 'first great age of Qing modernisation'. In this essay, the criteria for assessing the success of the movement is in whether it helped to protect China from foreign threats and achieve parity with the West in terms of the military, industry, education and diplomacy, since these were the aims of the movement. The successes of this movement were ultimately limited, and the movement failed to strengthen China especially against foreign imperialism, as evidenced by China's defeats in the Sino-French War of 1884 and the First Sino-Japanese War from 1894 to 1895. The causes of this general failure of the movement are the prevalence of traditionalism in the mindset of the Qing court, the lack of coordination and direction of the movement by it, and the existence of corruption during the movement. To focus on the point that the self-strengthening movement was a 'great age of Qing modernisation', as Fairbank argues, would be to miss a more holistic picture of the achievements of the movement. The historian Immanuel Hsu, who, while agreeing that the movement was indeed significant for being the first modernisation movement in China's history, criticises the movement for its piecemeal reforms, held back by traditionalism; this is a more accurate and balanced reflection of the nature of the modernisation efforts from 1861 to 1894.

Firstly, modernisation efforts from 1861 to 1894 in China failed because of a continued conservative mindset in the Qing court and government. The Qing mindset was shaped by the centuries-long existence of the belief that China was the 'Middle Kingdom', that China was the most important country in the world, and superior to others. This caused the Qing to look down on Westerners, even after they had been defeated by the West in the Opium Wars. Western learning was relegated to just the replication of Western technology for practical purposes. As for Western institutional models, they would be ignored. As the slogan of the movement went, 'Chinese learning is for the essence and Western learning is for the utility'. This resulted in piecemeal modernisation. For example, few Chinese would send their sons to the Tongwen Guan, an institution set up for the promotion of Western learning, partly because of conservative attitudes. Railways were seen as affecting fengshui and this was partly the reason behind the Chinese's lack of support for the construction of railways. In industry, the government played a dominating role and it forced out private and merchant capital due to the traditional official discrimination and resentment against merchants. Education and industrial reforms are important for modernisation because the

promotion of rational thought over superstition through education, and industrialisation are key characteristics of a modern nation. Thus, in the areas of education and industrial reforms, modernisation was limited by traditional ways of thinking, and this was a failure for the movement since the failure of modernise meant that China remained vulnerable to the modernised West. That being said, there were some advances in spite of the conservative mindset of the government. For example, the Tsungli Yamen was a Chinese foreign office newly set up during the movement, which also promoted modern schools, Western science, industry and communication. This is significant in the context of the traditionalism that existed because the Tsungli Yamen did all these things under frequent attacks by die-hard conservatives. Such successes support Fairbank's view that self-strengthening was a significant modernisation movement. However, these efforts were few and far between. It was more often the case that the traditional mindset won out. Part of the reason why the Chinese lost in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 was that there was a reluctance to comprehensively update the capabilities of the military, because Qing officials believed that Chinese Confucian morality, over Western-style force, would triumph in the end; this reflected a belief in the superiority of Chinese values over Western ways, resulting in no standardisation of weapons used in the war, with a mixture of modern and ancient weapons being pitted against the fully modernised and Westernised fighting force of the Japanese. Thus, the traditionalism that was prevalent in Qing China did more harm than good to the modernisation efforts, because it meant that reforms were piecemeal, and failed to protect China from foreign threats. Hence, Hsu's view that the movement was a superficial one despite it being the first modernisation effort of the Qing dynasty, which takes into account both the successes and the failures of the movement, is a better and more balanced view than Fairbank's.

Secondly, the self-strengthening movement failed because of the lack of coordination and direction of the movement by the Qing court. Due to the existing conservative attitudes in the Qing court, there was little political resolve in the Qing despite the crises that China faced to ensure that modernisation efforts were coordinated and united. This lack of coordination was shown in the modernisation of the military, which was done along provincial lines, with provincial leaders building their own provincial armies and fleets, and when foreign threats to China came, the lack of coordination meant that these armies and fleets did not cooperate with one another. In the Sino-French War of 1884, the provincial Peiyang and Nanyang fleets refused to go to the rescue of the Fukien fleet under enemy attack. There was also a practical side to this lack of direction – the modernisation effort was to be left to the provinces to save cost, and also continued the trend that China was facing towards provincialism, which had its precedents in the piecemeal unification of China by the Manchu Qing when they came to rule China in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This provincialism continued into the Taiping Rebellion, where the court, in a bid to suppress the rebellion, gave provincial leaders more autonomy to more effectively deal with the domestic threat. Overall, the provincial leaders' power was rising, and were now less restricted by the Qing court due to its lack of interest in modernisation. There were positives to this. Reform-minded provincial leaders could more freely pursue their modernisation plans without much interference from the central government. With this, developments ensued in the

areas of diplomacy, military and industry, led by provincial leaders such as Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang and Zuo Zongtang. Zeng was a far-sighted reformer who had, even before the movement, tried building a ship in Anking 1826. Zeng collaborated with Li to open the Kiangnan Arsenal in 1865 – it not only manufactured guns and cannons, but also constructed ships to counter the rise of the West. It also maintained a translation bureau. Li saw the need for China to catch up in shipbuilding and gunmaking, so apart from setting up the Kiangnan Arsenal with Zeng, he established the Nanking Arsenal and the Peiyang fleet under his control. Zuo established in Foochow Dockyard in 1866 which had an associated naval school that graduated a number of able officers; in industry he helped to establish a textile factory in Kansu. These were successes because they modernised the country along Western lines and contributed to the diplomatic, military, and economic strength of China in facing up to the foreign powers that threatened it. The work of these provincial leaders supports the claim of the revisionist Jack Gray that the self-strengthening movement has been underestimated and should be considered a movement that resulted in significant progress, a view that John Fairbank shares when he calls the movement the 'first great age of Qing modernisation'. Despite these successes, when China was endangered by threats from abroad, the Qing government's failure to coordinate and direct the provinces' efforts to modernise, led to disunity and defeat. In the Sino-French War of 1884, the provincial Peiyang and Nanyang fleets refused to go to the rescue of the Fukien fleet under enemy attack – there was present a sense of regionalism and eagerness for self-preservation. Similarly, during the Sino-Japanese War, only Li's Peiyang fleet fought the Japanese navy, whereas the Nanyang fleet and two other provincial squadrons at Canton and Foochow remained neutral for self-preservation. Hence, despite boasting of 65 ships compared with Japan's 32, China lost the battle as not all of China's fleet was mobilised. Practically, it was just Li's regional force fighting the might of the entire Japanese navy. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese suffered defeat in both these wars, and failed to prove the efficacy of their modernisation efforts. Hence, the lack of coordination and direction from the Qing courts of the modernisation movement meant that there was no unifying force to bring together the provinces and thus led to disunity which was counterproductive to the goal of modernising China as a united entity in the face of foreign threats. The defeat in the Sino-Japanese War showed that China had failed in protecting itself from foreign threats, an aim of the self-strengthening movement. To call the movement a 'great' age of Qing modernisation would be to overstate its successes vis-à-vis its failures.

Lastly, the prevalence of corruption in the Qing court and among the provincial gentry hindered the modernisation efforts during the self-strengthening movement. The lack of coordination and direction from the Qing court and the increasing power of the provincial governments meant that corrupt practices were not dealt with effectively in a centralised administration, and both the Qing court and the provincial gentry thus were corrupted. In the late 1880s, naval funds were diverted to the building of the Empress Dowager Cixi's Summer Palace, this was detrimental to military strength as the lack of funds resulted in poor modernisation and poor equipment of the navy, and Li Hongzhang was complicit in this. This was partly responsible for Li's Beiyang fleet's poor performance during the Sino-Japanese War, an example of how corruption helped to prevent the movement from

protecting China from foreign threats. Li was known for his corruption, choosing his subordinates based on their personal loyalty rather than for their ability and uprightness. Thus, Li's Peiyang command was corrupted and had many irregularities – many army and navy officers embezzled the funds that were originally allocated for military modernisation. For all of Li's efforts to modernise the military, when the Sino-Japanese War occurred, Li's modernised Peiyang fleet failed partly because of corruption. The guns on the two ironclad ships in the fleet used during the war were allocated only 3 shells each and many smaller guns were assigned the wrong size of shot. Torpedoes were filled with scrap iron and munition bags with sand and fake cannonballs used, which had been painted to look like the real thing. Therefore, corruption was a key factor in China's defeat in the war, an example of how overall, the prevalence of corruption defeated the aim to strengthen China against threats, especially external ones. Corruption resulted in the superficial modernisation efforts that Hsu argues is characteristic of the self-strengthening movement.

Overall, the self-strengthening movement, while being able to result in some successes, was overall a failure, mainly due to the lack of will of the Qing to modernise, and in the process, integrate Western ways into their institutions. This lack of will, which originated from a continued belief in traditional values and the centuries-long superiority of China, meant that modernisation was superficial and ultimately ineffective. Corruption could be overlooked and provincial leaders could go their own way, leaving China crippled instead of strengthened. To focus on the point that the self-strengthening movement as a 'great age of Qing modernisation', as Fairbank argues, would be to miss a more holistic picture of the achievements of the movement. Hsu, who, while agreeing that the movement was indeed significant for being the first modernisation movement in China's history, criticises the movement for its piecemeal reforms, held back by traditionalism; this is a more accurate and balanced reflection of the nature of the modernisation efforts from 1861 to 1894.