

Cixi and Modernization of China

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Abstract

Empress Dowager Cixi, birth mother of the Qing Dynasty Emperor Tongzhi, lived in the late 19th Century and the early 20th Century, and was the actual ruler of the Qing Dynasty from 1861 to 1908. Under her administration, her great support of Westernization during the earlier period promoted modernized revolution of Chinese society, whereas her objection to the political reform during the late period strangled the Hundred Days' Reform and hindered all-around progress of the Chinese society. Cixi did not only belong to the Renovation Group, but also belonged to the Conservative Liner, and she was an extremely contradictory and complicated historical figure.

Keywords: Cixi, Chinese modernization, Promotive role, Retardant role

When the national gate of China was exploded by hard ships and fierce cannons of Europe, regime of the late Qing Dynasty gradually went downhill step by step, and the process of Chinese modernization was forced to come on.

The major symbol of Chinese modernization is industrialization of the economy and democratization of the politics. In China, modernization means industrialization and reform of such aspects as politics, economy and culture, etc, which followed industrialization, and means realization of modern transition of the traditional society --- transition from the medieval society to modern society. Under administration of Cixi, Chinese modernization went through two stages. The first stage was the start-up period, in which the westernization group led the Westernization Movement, with the guiding ideology of "the system of Chinese learning and use of western learning", and the Westernization Movement was a "self-rescue" movement by the landocracy. Therefore, at that time, reform of political modernization was not started, and the Westernization Movement was launched mainly in the fields of economy, military, culture and education. The second stage was an overall development stage, and was the more important stage. When the danger of "national subjugation and genocide" stared Chinese people in the face, they recalled a painful experience, and came to realize that it was a must to combine in an organic way learning of advanced western scientific technology and reform of political system, and an all-around reform was required for Chinese politics, economy, military, culture and education. Hence, Chinese modernization moved forward one big step.

1. Promotive role played by Cixi in Chinese modernization

Cixi, with the surname of Yehe Nara, was born in 1835, got the opportunity to enter the imperial palace at the age of 17 through the activity of Picking Up Brides, was afterwards favored by the Emperor Xianfeng and gave birth to the only heir for the Emperor, that is, the subsequent Emperor Tongzhi. This enabled her to be endowed with particular identity and status in Qing Dynasty.

From 1856 to 1860, the Second Opium War broke out, and Anglo-French Allied Forces stormed and captured Beijing and set fire to the Old Summer Palace. The Emperor Xianfeng escaped to Rehe in panic, and fell ill before long as a result of worry and kicked the bucket. China at that time was in urgent need of strong men and powerful politicians to make vigorous efforts to turn the situation and to rescue the people from the mire. However, the feudal political system of "the country as a family" stipulated that, the Qing Dynasty could only be resigned to the "orphan and widowed mother" in the imperial palace. Thus, Cixi --- the imperial concubine of the Emperor was pushed by the history onto the stage of the country. After the Emperor Xianfeng passed away, Cixi could not tolerate the arrogant and imperious rudeness of the eight "assistant ministers of the government affairs". Furthermore, in order to strive for her own status and dignity and to help her son to protect and hold the dynasty, she had to risk her life, and launched the palace revolution. Success of "Xinyou Coup" laid foundation for her participation in affairs of the Dynasty.

The Qing Dynasty when Cixi began to "hold court from behind a screen" was heavily damaged, and was full of domestic strife and foreign aggression. Corruption of the royal family and encroachment of foreign countries,

together with resistance by the Han people against Manchu rule, made the Empress Dowager come to realize if she wanted to defend her people and the dynasty, there had to be one more powerful than her husband to operate the rudder. In order to stabilize the political situation, with help of the Prince Gong --- Yixin, Cixi adopted lots of new measures, which infused cardiac stimulant for the increasingly declining Qing Dynasty, enabled the dynasty to recover from chaos caused by the war. And gradually, the phenomenon of “resurgence” emerged.

The first measure taken by Cixi was to consolidate official management, and to appoint people according to their merits.

Since the years of Jiaqing and Daoguang, the general mood of the Qing Dynasty became deteriorated day by day and the root cause lied in corruption of the official circles. Quite a large number of Qing officials served personal interests through trickery, corrupted through misuse of the law and did not consider sharing concerns and resolving difficulties for the country. When invasion of external enemies and revolt of peasants became increasingly serious, there did not have generals who could lead soldiers and ministers who could govern the country in the dynasty. Therefore, Cixi took the initiative to consolidate official management, vigorously reduce corrupted and slothful officials, and promoted and employed those with talents. The whole country was shocked by her action and expressed their respect all at once.

What was especially important, Cixi began to reinstate boldly Han governmental officials. Similar to all emperors of the Qing Dynasty, Cixi had strong alert psychology towards Han officials, especially officials who controlled the army. However, considering the entire royal court, those Manchu imperial princes and court ministers were either pedantic and incapable, or puffed up with pride, whereas the overall political caliber of Han officials was higher than that of Manchu officials. Thus, in terms of employment of officials, Cixi was irrespective of Manchu and Han people and clearly demarcated rewards and punishment. For those meritorious Han bureaucrats and gentries, she raised their official positions and entrusted them with important posts. Such a sensible attitude of employment indeed won over a lot of talented Han people. Therefore, those Han officials headed by Zeng Guofan pledged their life to show loyalty to the Qing Dynasty, and finally exterminated the Peasants’ Revolt of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom.

From the perspective of securing the destiny of the Qing Dynasty, the policy of employment of Cixi was correct. Failure of the Peasants’ Revolt of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom enabled us to see clearly disillusion of the ideal of “imperial court”. The peasant class temporarily lost the opportunity to dominate the historical progress of Chinese modernization. However, the squirearchy had to eagerly open the gate of Chinese modernization in order to maintain their own interest and save their own destiny.

The second measure taken by Cixi was to vigorously support “Westernization Movement”.

The “Westernization Movement” occurred during the years of Tongzhi and Guangxu in Qing Dynasty. Faced up with attack of the Peasants’ Revolt of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and invasion by Anglo-French Allied Force in the Second Opium War, rulers of Qing Dynasty came to realize that, the tumbledown Qing Dynasty merely had one path to take, that is, to foster cordial relations with western countries, and to learn western military and scientific knowledge so as to seek for self-improvement and self-protection.

Cixi not only hated the Taiping Army, but also detested western people. Her attitude to foster cordial relations with western countries and to cooperate with them was really compelled against her will. Taiping Army attacked cities and plundered land in the Yangtze valley, and its invincible and imposing manner stroke terror into the heart of Cixi. Failure of Beijing, robbing and destroying of the Old Summer Palace and experience of the early death of her husband let Cixi remembered to the end of her life. She wished that Qing Dynasty could have the ability to resist domestic strife and foreign aggression. Therefore, she urgently adopted whatever sort of suggestions that could rescue the Qing Dynasty from the crisis and difficulties.

In 1861, she approved in succession two memorials by Yi Xin and Zeng Guofan, and determined basic strategies of the new westernization politics. Furthermore, she established Zongli Yamen to control all western affairs.

During the period of Westernization Movement, the Qing Government put huge investment to set up large quantities of arms factories, and manufactured guns and munitions by imitating western technology. The Government purchased a lot of warships from foreign countries and built enormous navy. Besides, the Government built railways, explored mines and opened Merchants Steamship Navigation Companies and telegraph offices, etc. At the same time, the Government also controlled and led development of a part of civil industry. Within the period of almost 30 years, the Westernization Group “altogether held sixty modern enterprises which applied machines and invested funds of approximately 53 million Liang.” At the same time, the Westernization Group also made a precedent of Chinese modern education in that they positively advocated

western learning, held new types of schools, sent students to study abroad, encouraged students to learn western natural scientific knowledge, and vigorously cultivated westernization talents, which all convincingly promoted development of Chinese modernization.

In ancient China, practice of western scientific technology and culture antipathetic with traditional culture would necessarily cause lots of reproaches. When contradiction and conflicts happened between the Westernization Group and the Diehard Group, usually Cixi would come down in the favour of the Westernization Group. For example, when the Diehard in the Dynasty opposed to the Schools of Combined Learning and employed western people to teach students, Cixi would make her position crystal-clear, “the Dynasty set up Schools of Combined Learning, which is to learn through correct approaches, not to take the wrong path by giving up a saint path. This is without any doubt”. With support from Cixi, then the Schools of Combined Learning dared to invite the American William Martin as a head teacher, and set up such new disciplines as mathematics, chemistry, physics, astronomy, international law, geography and history, medical science and physiology, etc, to cultivate quite a large number of translating talents, diplomatic talents and scientific talents for modern China. Thus, it could be said that, without support of Cixi, the Westernization Movement could not have been launched.

It should also be seen that, Cixi also showed particular interest of being willing to have a positive try in achievements of western civilization. Generally speaking, Cixi looked upon western people with hatred and in most cases, showed contempt to western culture, but this did not hinder her from accepting western scientific achievements. Cixi did not discriminate against cameras, electric lights, motor vehicles and trains invented by western people, but would take pleasure in having a try. She was in support of building railway in China, and decided to take the train back to Fengtian for ancestor worship. When ministers in the imperial court signed a petition to oppose her decision and thought it was dangerous to take the train, Cixi blew a fuse and torn into pieces these memorials. And she rebuked, “Shall we not take the train just because former emperors have never taken the train? If the train had existed at that time, they would have taken the train. What’s more, even if there is any danger, we are not afraid since we have had so many dangerous experiences.” She would also like to invite American female painters to draw a portrait for her in the imperial palace, so that her portraits could be sent to the American St. Louis Fair for exhibition. It can be seen that, Cixi did not discriminate against new western objects, and she was not old-maidish or stubborn. On the contrary, she took a positive and open attitude, willing to accept any achievements of western civilization, although the purpose to accept these achievements was for her own enjoyment. After all, this had led the fashion.

After the Gengzi Incident, Cixi was again deeply irritated, and further began to carry out new policies. Compared with the Hundred Days Reform, the “New Cixi Policy” was, as a matter of fact, a modernized movement with a larger scale, which supposed that reform purposes in the aspects of politics, economy, military, education and culture, ect, were almost unanimous with proposals of the Hundred Days’ Movement, and even more complete. Because Cixi held power in her hands and took a serious attitude to supervise its implementation, the new political system achieved certain effects. Especially when she sent ministers to inspect in western countries, she began to gradually accept the constitutional monarchy in western countries. She made preparations for constitutionalism and prepared to conduct modernized reform on the political system of the Chinese society, which was a commendable historical progress. Of course, at that time, the situation in China was quite complicated, and the process of constitutionalism was relatively slow. Thus, this slight amelioration had had no effect on the turbulent Qing Dynasty. However, it had already been quite difficult for a feudal monarch like Cixi to be encountered with so many changes. From the subjective perspective, what she did was to defend her own throne and the territory of Qing Dynasty, whereas from the objective perspective, this reform accelerated the progress of modernization in China, and also created conditions for complete collapse of the Qing Dynasty. Hence, implementation of the new political policy indeed has gradually accumulated resources for modernization in China and has prepared conditions in social and material aspects for transition of the society.

Although there were quite a good many achievements due to be asserted in her earlier years, after all, Cixi was a feudal empress who lived in the imperial court for long and barely knew the rudiments, her thoughts could not surpass that era. Although she was proficient in arts of being an empress, she was ignorant of the tide in the world. As a result of historical and personal limits, Cixi was unlikely to become a politician of the bourgeoisie, make a thorough reform on the feudal society of China and lead China to take the path of developing the capitalism. Thus, in the historical process of Chinese modernization, the active role played by Cixi was quite limited.

2. Retardant role played by Cixi in Chinese modernization

As a particular historical figure who dominated the fate of China in the second half of the 19th Century, Cixi

indeed left a contemptible impression upon her people, which enabled them to have a clear view of her narrowness, nearsightedness and ignorance. In face of signs of danger appearing everywhere, she either turned a blind eye or lagged in response, or made things worse by repeated delays. Quite a lot of her behaviors posed threat to invasion of China by foreign countries, and caused the ancient China to be trapped in the crisis of “national subjugation and genocide”, and to slip towards the semi-feudal and semi-colonial abyss step by step.

The retardant role played by Cixi in the progress of Chinese modernization was mainly embodied in her throttling of the “Hundred Days’ Movement”.

The Hundred Days’ Movement originated from failure of China in the Battle of the Yalu River. The Battle of the Yalu River was an important war in the modern history of China, and it determined the political pattern of Asia in the first half of the 20th Century. Since this war, Japan jumped to be the biggest power in Asia, whereas the Qing Dynasty could not recover after the setback and lost the ability of recovery.

As the highest emperor and decision maker in Qing Dynasty, Cixi could not shirk her responsibility for failure of the Battle of the Yalu River. Through analysis of the fundamental reasons for failure of this war, it is not difficult to find out the primary cause for the failure was that, effects of the Westernization Movement in China were far inferior to effects of the “Meiji restoration” in Japan. The Westernization Movement that lasted for almost thirty years in Qing Dynasty did not enable China to really take the path of Capitalism as a result of its strong feudalism and corruption and its long tail of feudalism, and China did not really become powerful and prosperous. Therefore, the Battle of the Yalu River was, as a matter of fact, a war between a laggard and corrupted feudal imperialism and a great capitalism power that was being rising. Even at the initial stage of the war, people could foresee its outcome. Of course, lag did not necessarily mean failure, but lag together with corruption would necessarily result in failure in the war.

Cixi was clearly aware of arrogant, peacockish, false and greedy characteristics of her officials, but she herself did not know how to eliminate the corruption and she did not possess this power, because she herself was the general representative of the corruption power in the Chinese society. The year 1894 was the 60th birthday of Cixi. To congratulate on the birthday of the Empress Dowager was the first great event for civil and military officials in the imperial court. Officials from all over the nation had to present articles of tribute for the imperial palace, which were exactly outcome of their corruption and degeneration, rap and rend. The American Painter Karl described the occasion in which articles of tribute were presented in the imperial palace. "The first time when I experienced such an occasion was congratulation on the birthday of the Emperor, and at that time, I was greatly stunned by the quantity and exquisite sorts of birthday presents sent continuously to the imperial palace. However, that occasion fell into the shade compared with the birthday of the Empress Dowager. The age of the Empress Dowager was older than that of the Emperor, and the quantity and value of birthday presents was proportional to the age, so the birthday presents for the Empress Dowager surpassed in terms of quantity and types. Cixi was extremely luxurious in her living, and in order to satisfy her greediness, officials in the imperial palace had to take all means to peculate military expenditure at the critical moment when the Sino-Japanese War was on the verge of breaking out, and in the situation of empty national treasury and financial embarrassment, and rebuilt the Old Summer Palace to make preparations for congratulation on the birthday of the Empress Dowager. At the frontline, Chinese military army lost its territory, and suffered a serious defeat. Japanese army attacked and occupied Lvshun, burning, killing and pillaging, and committed all manners of crimes, whereas the Chinese people suffered cruel slaughter. However, as the king of the nation, Cixi accepted congratulations, entertained her ministers, and held a grand and luxurious ceremony in the imperial court to satisfy her private ends. It would have been irrational if such a corrupted government had not collapsed. "When a dynasty regarded the birthday of its highest emperor as being more important than the rise and fall of the nation, then this dynasty would go to a hopeless dead end."

Failure of the Battle of the Yalu River and signing of “Treaty of Shimonoseki” shocked the soul of Chinese people to a great extent. Those advanced intellectuals in China put themselves forward when the nation was faced up with the crisis, and raised a Reform Movement. The “Reform Movement” is a monument in the process of modernization in China, a great patriotic movement to save the nation from extinction and is also the actual starting point of modern democratic enlightenment movement in China.

During the earlier years of Tongzhi, he accepted idea of Zeng Guofan to send young people to study abroad for building ships and manufacturing machines to make the nation thriving and powerful. However, when the Renovation Group pointed the spearhead of the reform to the feudal political system and to the obstinate feudal conservative liners in the imperial court, Cixi who had always been waiting and seeing came on the stage. The Empress Dowager discovered that Kang Youwei attacked the two major backbones of her political power system,

namely, Confucianism and organizational corruption, and her entire world was encountered with great threat. Thus, she could not sit by and watch the Renovation Group attacking and overthrowing the political system of Qing Dynasty that she had elaborated for almost 30 years, and could not stand development, expansion and centrifugal trend of the power of the emperor's followers. In order to defend her personal stateliness, power and interests of the conservative liner, she ruthlessly and cruelly throttled this Reform Movement by employing her rich political experiences. This fully embodied her class nature of going against the tide of the history.

Considering thoughts, ideas and behaviors of Cixi during this historical period, it is not difficult to find out that her defense of rights was almost on the verge of a morbid degree. As the highest imperator of the feudal dynasty, Cixi was deeply aware of the importance of rights, and experiences of attending to the state affairs for several times endowed her with a dictatorial personality. She did not cultivate emperors for Qing Dynasty who could turn things around, so she had to share risks and pleasure of being a king by herself. During the ten years when Guangxu took over the reins, he always asked Cixi for instructions before the event and reported to her after the event. Although Cixi returned political power to Guangxu, she did not retire, and still assumed overall responsibilities, so Guangxu was merely a puppet emperor without any actual rights. Existence of the "Empress Dowager" of Cixi and this omnipresent domination constrained Guangxu like shackles, and compelled him to have no choice but to be modest, courteous, prudent and complimentary. After failure of the Battle of the Yalu River, Guangxu decided to have a vigorous reform, but he was restricted everywhere and stumbled at every step. All ministers in the imperial court were trusted followers of Cixi, so they carefully watched action and words of Guangxu, pretended to obey his decrees, and had a mind to hold off his decrees, which made the Emperor extremely depressed. Thus, he ran counter to Cixi's will, started to employ Reformers and asked them for strategies and plans. According to investigation in historical facts, Cixi also had the intention of political reform. The primary issue she born in mind was how to reform, to what direction should the reform go and who to rely on. She held a positive attitude towards development of Capitalist industry and commerce in western countries. Although customs and decrees in western countries were different from those in China, their military, agricultural, industrial and commercial fields were advanced, which indeed was worthy being learned. If Qing Dynasty could choose and follow what was right, and develop the above fields one by one, then China would also become prosperous. However, she did not allow the Renovation Group to sway her rights, and to behave independently without asking for instructions from her. On the contrary, she still decided to control Guangxu, control the entire progress of reform, defend interest of Manchu princes and ministers, and protect the feudal political system of "the country as a family". The constitutional monarchy advocated by the Renovation Group was totally different from the autocratic monarchical system she had always been carrying out, so he had no means to accept the parliament democratic political system in western countries. Moreover, she could not tolerate the plot of "followers of the Emperor" to challenge rights of her followers with the name of reform.

As a matter of fact, Cixi was a diligent empress, and was not one who enjoyed fortune from subjugation of the nation, and throughout her life, she was determined to defend Qing Dynasty. In order to realize this purpose, she had to endure to get along with western people and attempted to learn advantages of western people. However, she did not understand the key of the path of self-improvement. Failure of the Battle of the Yalu River announced failure of the Westernization Movement to reform merely in terms of "waref". The young generation headed by Guangxu was sharp in thinking and experienced and observed reasons underlying, so he was determined eagerly to carry out reform. Nevertheless, elderly ministers in the imperial court, including Cixi, did not see clearly changes of the tide in the world, and did not come to realize the significance of political system and economic system of Capitalism to the powerful and prosperous path of the nation. Thus, they were slow in reacting, and became executioners who throttled the advanced movement.

After interdicting and throttling the Hundred Days' Movement, Cixi's relation with western people changed. She was extremely dissatisfied with western people's support of Guangxu, interference in affairs of the imperial court, and help for the Renovation Group to flee to foreign countries, and she thought this was contempt for her stateliness and challenge to her power. Therefore, she had no choice but to resort to the Boxer to make a stand against western people. Beyond her expectation, her decision resulted in invasion in China by the Eight-Power Allied Forces, and Chinese people again suffered from cruel massacre and plunder. After the Eight-Power Allied Forces attacked Beijing, Cixi fled westward, and sobbed all the way. In order to defend the position of the emperor, she took all means to "weigh all goods and materials as well as manpower in China and exchanged them with western countries to get their favour in return". What she was concerned with was merely gain and loss of her own power, and she could not tolerate to lose whatever her power had brought to her. In order to satisfy her personal selfish desire, she even set aside destiny of the common people and the future of the nation, and signed "Boxer Protocol" with the Eight-Power Allied Forces which humiliated the country and forfeited its

sovereignty. This protocol caused China to sink into an abyss beyond redemption, and from then on, Chinese nation suffered from more serious national disaster. Finally, the Qing Dynasty thoroughly degenerated as an imperial court for western countries, and Cixi was once again cursed by the entire nation. Under the circumstance when the whole nation was disintegrated, the progress of Chinese modernization was again suffocated.

The second half of the 19th Century was the most critical moment of life-and-death for China to challenge western big powers. Under the circumstance when western industrial revolution was nascent, Cixi, as the highest decision maker of Qing Dynasty, should have complied with the historical tide to strengthen the degree of reform in the Chinese society and to follow up steps of advanced countries in the world. Yet, having been pushed forward to the historical stage, Cixi did not assume foresight and sagacity of the important mission. Especially by the end of her late years, she did not make adequate preparations and give thorough consideration to progress and targets of reform in the Chinese society, but just passively rectified policies under stimulation of external forces. Although she had struggled, she failed to turn around the declining tendency of Qing Dynasty. The reason was that Cixi did not realize that the political system of Capitalism was more advanced than the feudal political system. In the historical situation when the history of the world stepped into the era of Capitalism, it was a historical proposition absolutely impossible to be realized to both maintain the feudal system and to make the nation prosperous. Until her death, Cixi had not come to realize this truth, so her action and behaviors blockaded the progress of modernization in China. This was not only her personal tragedy, but also a tragedy of Chinese history.

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