

Chapter One

The Rise of Confucian Radicalism

At the end of April, 1895 Kang Youwei, a 37-year-old aspiring candidate to high government, drafted a petition to the emperor demanding that the Qing refuse to surrender to Japan and that it immediately undertake a series of fundamental reforms. Shocked equally by China's defeat at the hands of the Japanese in Korea and by the harshness of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, about twelve hundred of the candidates who had come along with Kang to Beijing for the highest level civil service examinations (*jinshi*), signed the petition. This was equivalent to a mass protest. The signers risked the wrath of the Qing court, which had, after all, committed itself to the treaty and did not countenance criticism.

According to the treaty, the Qing would pay 200 million taels in indemnities; recognize Japan's preeminence in Korea; cede Taiwan and the Pescadores to Japan; open four more treaty ports; and grant Japan the right to build factories around any treaty port. Through most-favored-nation clauses in earlier treaties, the other Powers automatically received the same rights. Looking forward, we can see that the war thus opened China to direct foreign investment: this became a major route for modern technology to reach China. As foreign investments grew—almost \$800 million in 1902 and well over \$1.5 billion by 1914—the Powers found themselves with a stake in China's economic stability. The war also marked Japan's rise as a Pacific power in its own right. Looking back, we can see it as one of a string of defeats China had suffered since the 1840s, each defeat giving the foreign powers greater commercial, religious, diplomatic, and even territorial rights. But this particular defeat was especially shocking since China—after

several decades of “self-strengthening” modeled on Western technology—had expected to win the war. It was even more shocking because Chinese officials had long perceived Japan as an insignificant island on the periphery of Chinese civilization.

In this chapter I outline the basis of the 1895 protest movement and the political typhoon it provoked, and I try to show why this period marks the origins of modern politics and culture in China. What “modern” suggests here is the first of a series of calls to enlarge political participation, a process that involved rethinking how the Chinese state should be structured. In addition, as Kang Youwei (1858-1927) was aware, the older generation of political leaders had little sense of the enormous economic, technological, and cultural dynamism of Western civilization, the cutthroat rivalries of the nation-state system, the relentless nature of progress, or the need to reform China’s most fundamental institutions to employ national energies more efficiently. The movement Kang spearheaded looked backward to Chinese tradition for sources of inspiration, sideways to Europe and Japan for models that could be utilized, and forward, against its own original intentions, to the overthrow of a dynasty that proved unable to reform quickly enough.¹ Kang and his generation of Confucian radicals wished to combine loyalty to the Confucian values and worldview they had been raised on with loyalty to the emperor; loyalty to the emperor with loyalty to a reformed Qing system; and loyalty to the Qing with loyalty to the nation, the Chinese people as a whole. They began to ask new questions: Who was the nation? How were the Chinese people to be defined? Did loyalty to the nation mean support for strong government? What kind of government?

“Confucian radicalism”—though it may sound like an oxymoron—signifies strident calls for thorough-going reform based on readings of the Confucian classics and made by men (women had not yet found a political voice) educated in the Confucian tradition. If

these men called for a measure of Westernization, it was a program nonetheless rooted in a Confucian view of the world. They wanted China to become strong, standing unchallenged among the sovereign powers. They wanted, in other words, to be able to pick and choose what foreign ideas they would adopt. However, in the rapid expansion of imperialist threats against China after 1895 the fear was that these foreign powers would “carve up China like a melon” and even that the Chinese people might perish. Hopes and fears thus meshed to produce an atmosphere of unimaginable tension. In 1895, though, even the younger generation of educated Chinese gentlemen still had few doubts about the fundamental legitimacy of their culture.

Their immediate political challenge was that mere examination candidates, even experienced, mature men like themselves, did not have the right to petition the emperor. Neither the emperor nor the Empress Dowager, Cixi, who actually controlled the court, saw Kang’s petition, since Beijing officials confiscated it. It was lengthy (nicknamed the “ten-thousand-word memorial”), and its real point went beyond the demand for continued resistance against Japan, significant as that was. Kang and his cohorts were demanding a fundamental reordering of the entire political system. A few of the most insightful of the younger gentry understood something of the power of national unity. Tang Caichang, soon to become one of Kang’s followers, wrote his brother in 1895: “You cannot stand alone as a scholar and despise them [the peasants] as the ignorant masses. If you first gain their hearts, in the future when war comes, you will have help in the midst of confusion.”² Kang’s petition, called upon the government to promote industry; modernize the army; build railroads, a postal system, and a merchant marine; employ “good men,” even using the talents of the Overseas Chinese (mostly lower class merchants but technically and commercially skilled); and improve agriculture through training schools. Today, such reforms may not sound particularly radical, but they

envisioned a much more active government than any China had seen before. The petition did not shrink from calling on the government to raise taxes. More tellingly, the reformers envisioned an active citizenry: people not just dedicated to their families and local community good but to fueling China's growth and progress.

Kang Youwei was from Guangdong Province, near Guangzhou (Canton), the city where the modern Western presence had been felt the longest. His background is described by the historian Jerome Grieder: "born into a solid gentry family, an heir to the great culture, ...he set out at an early age to become what in fact he became, in his own estimate at least: a Confucian Sage."³ From an early age, Kang appointed himself to save humankind, and although he studied the Confucian classics and Buddhism and read many Western works in translation, he can only be understood as a religious leader, not a scholar. After a period of intense study in 1878, when he was twenty-one, he experienced a breakdown, followed by an awakening. As Kang later recollected:

While sitting in meditation, I suddenly saw that the ten thousand creatures of Heaven and Earth and I were all of the same body; a great light dawned, and I believed I was a sage: then I laughed with joy. Suddenly I thought of the sufferings of life: then I cried with melancholy. Suddenly I thought of the parent I was not serving—how could I be studying?—then forthwith I packed up and went back to dwell by his grave.⁴

Kang succeeded in passing the 1895 *jinshi* exams. Leaving Beijing that autumn, Kang and his disciples, most notably Liang Qichao (1873-1929), quickly went on to establish new "study societies" designed to turn young, educated Chinese into a potent political force. With revealing names like the "Society for the Study of National Strength" a number of similar groups formed libraries, schools, and publishing projects, sometimes under the auspices of sympathetic provincial governors. Their journals called

for ever more radical reforms: notions of parliamentary democracy, “popular power,” and equality began to be aired.

The radical Confucians’ main goal was to “unify” the emperor and the people. Thus parliaments were not thought of as bodies representing diverse interests, much less conflicting wills, but as locations where “communication between top and bottom” would be established and consensus reached. The old Confucian faith in community solidarity was thus given fresh institutional guise. But the sense that non-officials, even commoners should *participate* in the affairs of state was a sign of the radicalism of the day. The “people” were emerging into Chinese public consciousness as a force in their own right. Who the people were exactly remained to be determined, but the Confucian radicals looked to them with hope. The Confucian classics spoke of *minben*—the people as the basis of the state—saying that the duty of the ruler was to feed and clothe his people, since the kingdom would collapse without them. *Minben* was thus a rather paternalistic morality of the elite and also a practical tool. Although the reformers saw *minben* as the cultural basis on which real democracy might be built, the Confucian *minben* had never allowed for the people’s active political participation. In other words, it represented an ideal of rulership *for* the people, but not *of* or *by* the people. The Confucian radicals did not regard themselves as mere commoners and, in their calls for the court to expand the political processes, they had themselves mostly in mind. Still, the reformers understood that in the new world of imperialism and competing nation-states, the people had to be incorporated into the political life of the community. The first to preach this doctrine was Liang Qichao.