
UNIT 6 SELF STRENGTHENING MOVEMENT AND THE HUNDRED DAYS REFORMS

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will:

- have an idea about the Self Strengthening movement and how it helped in securing the State;
- become familiar with the restoration of the agrarian system of the state;
- able to learn how the Tongzhi rulers made efforts to re-establish the civil authority and administration;
- become familiar with the second phase of the Self Strengthening movement;
- learn about the results of the Restoration and the Self Strengthening movements; and
- get an idea of the Hundred Days Reform, its scope and the reasons for its failure.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The 19th century was a significant period in the history of modern China. With the advance of imperialist powers and the developing internal crisis the Qing state and society embarked on a programme of reform which, during the course of the 19th century, was to extend beyond what was originally proposed in the form of the Tongzhi Restoration of the 1860's and 1870's and its corollary, the Self Strengthening movement. The respite provided by the brief conciliatory policy followed by the Western powers after the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858, gave the Qing state the space to tackle the Taiping's and to consider the problems posed by the foreigners and rebellious peasants. What started as a programme to strengthen the Qing state and give it a new lease of life, became at the end of the 19th century a quest for a more broad-based attempt at reform. The 1898 reform movement, which in a sense was to lay the foundations for the enveloping storm of the early 20th century, ended with the dismantling of the Imperial edifice itself. This Unit takes into account the various aspects related with the Self Strengthening movement and the Hundred Days Reforms.

6.2 THE SELF STRENGTHENING MOVEMENT

In the mid-19th century, the Qing state, having withstood challenges from the internal crisis generated by the Taiping's and the European onslaughts of the two Opium Wars, embarked upon a programme of reform and strengthening the state. This period referred to as the Tongzhi Restoration had two major policy components. Tongzhi was the reign title of the Emperor who ascended the Chinese throne in November 1861. Tongzhi's reign extended from 1861-1874.

The two aspects of the policy were:

- 1) **Restoration of Qing power :** This was a cardinal theme of restoring the power and glory of the state and by implication of Confucian society. The idea of restoration was not anything new. There were in fact several such restorations attempted in Chinese history which in the interim provided a renewal of faith and commitment in the dynasty and the traditional order. The more significant of these restorations were in the 9th century B.C. of the Western Chou, the Han restoration of the first century A.D. and the Tang in the 8th century A.D.
- 2) **Self Strengthening (zhiqiangyundong):** This entailed a limited modernization policy concerned initially with the creation of an armaments industry. However, during the 1870's and 1880's modernization was extended to areas of industry, communications and most importantly to education.

6.2.1 Architects of the Restoration and Self Strengthening

The principal architects of these programmes were Prince Kung (1833-1898), the brother of the late Xianfeng Emperor and Wen Xiang (1818-1876) who was the Chairman of the Ministry of Public works and the Minister of Civil works. At the provincial level they were fortunate to have some outstanding bureaucrats who built the programme. The most prominent of them was ZhengGuofan (1811-1872) who in 1860 as the Imperial Commissioner was instrumental in helping the state to quell the Taipings.

Zuo Zongtang (1812-1885), another official who had come to the limelight in the wake of the anti-Taiping manoeuvres, played a critical role in the establishment of modern enterprises and in restoring the agrarian economy.

One of the principal figures of the Restoration was Li Hongzhang (1823-1901), who during the last half of the 19th century played an important role in China's relations with the Western powers.

These officials were supported by a host of provincial leaders and officials, all products of the examination system. They were products of Confucian education and committed to preserving the social order and the Confucian conception of the State. One needs to bear in mind that this social and ideological base was to determine both the contours as well as the extent of reform that was proposed.

6.2.2 Restoration of the Agrarian Economy

In the mid-19th century several observers were to comment on the general desolateness of the Chinese people. The Yangtze valley was described in the following manner in the Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (1865):

Smiling fields were turned into desolate wilderness; "fenced cities into ruinous heaps." The plains of Kiang-nan, Kiang-si and Cheikang were strewn with human skeletons; their rivers polluted with floating carcasses; wild beasts descending from the fastnesses in the mountains roamed at large over the land, and made their dens in the ruins of deserted towns.... no hands were left to till the soil, and noxious weeds covered the ground once tilled with patient industry.

Restoration of the agrarian economy became the principal concern at this time. Limitations were placed on government spending and more importantly on the material aspirations of the peasantry. The idea was neither to increase national wealth nor production. A balance was sought to be struck between state finances and people livelihood and thereby to re-emphasize the principles of Confucian political economy.

The programme had three major thrusts:

- 1) extension of cultivated areas,
- 2) expansion of public works, and
- 3) reduction of land tax

Let us briefly discuss each one of them:

1) Extension of cultivated areas

In the wake of the political disturbances of the first half of the 19th century, much land lay abandoned because of the migration of the rural population. As political strife ended, efforts were made to repopulate areas like Hunan, where demobilized soldiers were given plots of land. Peasants were encouraged to migrate to the more prosperous and irrigated regions. For instance, in Chin Chiang in Jiangxi province, the population increased from 8000 to 40,000 in a period of just 6 months. Although some of the repopulation was spontaneous, Qing officials encouraged it through homestead acts. Agricultural resettlement offices were established to encourage group organization and to distribute seed-grain and tools.

The results of this policy were, however, uneven. In some provinces like Jiangxi, Anhui, Fujian and Zhenjiang more peasants than before owned land in the form of small farms of less than one hectare. In Zhenjiang, in Jiangsu province for example, big landowners had disappeared in the wake of the Taipings and only peasant owners were left. With the restoration, however, land was given back to the original owners. Besides bureaucrats and army officers built up vast holdings. Now a clear trend emerged towards concentration of land ownership.

2) Reconstruction of public works

In an effort to fight famines, reserve granaries were repaired and additional granaries created with the help of the gentry. The most urgent task, however, remained the waterworks. Dikes and canals had been badly neglected. In Zhili, Shandong, Shenxi and Sichuan vast enterprises were launched to repair hydraulic works and recover flooded lands. Though it was recognized that the major threat to the agrarian stability of the North China plain was the vagaries of the Yellow River, attempts to control it remained at the planning stage only.

3) Reduction of taxes

A principal target of the popular movements had been the tax abuses. It is estimated that during the Tongzhi rule, land taxes were cut by some 30 per cent. An important step was the permanent reduction of land tax in the more affected areas like Jiangsu.

As in the case of all the other reforms, the benefits of the tax reforms did not reach the peasants. This was because:

- the rise in the price of silver cancelled out any benefit that they may have enjoyed,
- the land registers were not drawn up nor the new tariffs published, hence local magistrates and gentry continued to collect taxes at the old rates, and
- the proposed reduction in land tax was not accompanied by a reduction in rent.

The majority of peasants who were tenant farmers were thus left outside the purview of the tax reform.

The attempt at rehabilitation of the agrarian economy hardly improved the lot of the peasants, since the larger social economic and political exploitation of the peasant by the large landowners continued.

There were several other aspects of the non-agrarian economy which received little attention. The Restoration government had no policy of encouraging the revival and development of trade and commerce and did little in this direction.

There were some attempts to improve transportation as a means to fortify Beijing by sea and to ensure a sustained food supply. Steamships gradually replaced the big seagoing junks. In 1872 the China Merchant's Steam Navigation Company was started. There was considerable resistance to the introduction of steamships for inland water transport, the building of railways and the telegraph system. It was believed that these innovations would seriously undermine the Confucian social order.

To sum up, economic policy during this period was essentially conservative. The aim, both stated and unstated, was to re-establish and strengthen the agrarian foundations of the traditional state with a minimal of change. Land was given back to the original owners in the areas affected by the Taipings. It was the gentry which directly benefited by the reduction in taxes.

6.2.3 Restoration of State and Civil Authority

Besides the agrarian and economic rejuvenation, the Tongzhi Restoration focused on the re-establishment of state authority and administration which had been seriously undermined during the first half of the nineteenth century. Substantial attempts were made to improve the bureaucracy with an emphasis on recruiting “men of talent”. As in the past, examination was stressed upon as the only road to power and prestige. Attempts were made to curtail the sale of degrees and offices which during the preceding decades had reached alarming proportions, a process which was perceived as contributing to the general morale of the civil administration. The goal was to be able to recruit the ideal officer, an officer of all round competence. Besides trying to streamline the bureaucracy in line with the goals of a Confucian state, the Qing quickly re-established the economic, legal and social privileges of the elite in an attempt to consolidate their support.

The political and administrative reconstruction was consolidated through ideological reconstruction, with an emphasis on Confucian knowledge. Schools and academies were reopened in an attempt to extend Confucian teaching to a wider section of people.

6.2.4 New Diplomacy Towards the West

Despite the defeat in the two Opium Wars most Chinese officials and gentry believed that the barbarians could be driven back. A few leaders mentioned earlier, however, like Prince Gong, Wen Xiang, Li Hongzhang and others, recognizing the gravity of the foreign aggression, felt it necessary to evolve new institutions to contain foreign encroachments. Hence, on January 20, 1861 the Zongli Yamen was created. The role of the Zongli Yamen was seen as one of controlling the superintendents of foreign trade in the various ports. It had general charge of all China's relations with the Western powers. Here it would be pertinent to mention the translation of Wheaton's work, *Elements of International Law* into Chinese by an American missionary, WAP Martin in 1864. This translation was tremendously useful to the Chinese since it enabled the Zongli Yamen to insist on the inviolability of treaties, that is, they tried to make the treaties a protective wall for the Chinese government and to confine the Western powers to the letter of the treaty.

6.2.5 Self Strengthening

A closely connected policy of the Restoration was the official policy of limited modernization, called the “foreign matters movement”, a term that came to refer to anything foreign from diplomacy to industrial machinery. The first expression of this policy was the creation of an armaments industry. Following this was the development of mines, communications and textile industry, all of which were covered by the new objectives of the 1870's onwards of acquiring “wealth and power”. This had first been advocated for reasons of domestic policy, i.e.:

- to ensure the Imperial militia's ability to suppress popular movements, and
- to resist the foreigners.

It was an attempt at national recovery in domestic and foreign relations. There was a growing recognition that to maintain power a minimum of technology had to be borrowed from the West. Feng Guifen (1808-1874), a scholar from Suzhou, wrote a series of essays of the need to utilize Western technology to defend the traditional state. Feng's ideas found a fair response among the officials and gentry all of whom were concerned with the preservation of the traditional order.

To rationalize and justify the introduction of Western technology, a popular axiom of the period was 'Chinese learning as essence and Western knowledge for practical use'. This view tried to forestall any criticism that the changes proposed were inimical to the basic values and norms of Confucian culture and society.

Given the military humiliation that China had faced, the modernization of the military was given initial priority. The two major aspects of the military modernization were to;

- re-organize the Qing armies and to reinforce loyalty to the state of the rapidly, growing regional armies, and
- make China militarily equal in arms and armaments of the West.

This recognition of the need of modern weapons and their manufacture in China led to the establishment between 1865-67 of four major arsenals.

- The Jiangnan arsenal was started under the aegis of Zheng Guofan in 1865.
- The Nanjing arsenal was started by Li Hongzhang.
- The Fuchou shipyard was founded by Zuo Zhongtang in 1867.
- An arsenal was started at Tianjin in-1867 under the direction of a Manchu dignitary, Chung-hou with an Englishman Meadows as technical advisor.

However, the first of the objectives of reorganizing the armies remained unfulfilled, since it would have involved greater changes in class structures and values, changes which the Qing was unwilling to allow.

The modern arsenals introduced mechanized production in China for the first time. This did not, however, lead to a technological revolution. Nor did it result in the emergence of a bourgeoisie. The arsenals were essentially state enterprises which did not stimulate any ancillary industry and functioned more or less like bureaucratic departments racked by growing deficits, inefficiency and corruption.

The first phase of the industrialization policy, however, was not able to stem the tide of decline in the agrarian economy and the traditional handicraft sector.

Though the emphasis in the first instance was on borrowing of Western technology for the making of rifles, cannons and modern ships, there were other trends which developed at the same time. The Zongli Yamen required interpreters. To meet this demand foreign language schools (Tongwen Guan) were started. The first of these was started in Beijing where English, Russian and French

were taught. Other centres were opened in Canton and Shanghai. There were also schools attached to the arsenals which gave instructions in technical subjects and Western languages. Gradually these schools extended to introducing other Western subjects as well. The long-term consequences of this trend were to be seen not only in the field of education but Chinese views on change, reform and modernization.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss in about five lines two major Policy Components of Tongzhi Restoration during 1861-1874.

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- 2) Analyse in about ten lines what were the efforts made by the Tongzhi Restoration for the re-establishment of the state authority and administration.

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- 3) Write about five lines on Tung Wen Kuan.

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6.3 THE SECOND PHASE

During the 1870's arms manufacture seemed less important once the great popular uprising had been suppressed. Soon the second phase of the Self-Strengthening movement was launched. Li Hongzhang and others intended to draw on the wealth and competence of the merchants to set up new enterprises. They aimed to make China rise to "wealth and power" (Fu-kiang) as Li Hongzhang wrote in 1872. Li applied the term 'government supervision and merchant operation' (kuantushang pan) to all the new enterprises that were started. As part of this policy the China Merchant's Steam Navigation Company was launched in 1872. Even here the attempts to draw in private capital though successful in the first few years, did not last very long. By 1877, the Company under the guidance of Sheng Xuanhuai (1844-1916) represented the interests of the bureaucracy. The mining industry was developed both to meet the demands of the armaments industry as well as to forestall the foreigners who were demanding the right to open mines in China. Between 1876-1885 about 10 mines were opened based on the 'government supervision and merchant operation' system.

It was in the textile industry that there was some competition between official and private enterprise. The Shanghai Cotton Cloth mill started in the late 1880's went into production in 1890. In the 1860's several textile companies were launched by a Chinese comprador with support from foreign firms. The first

entirely Chinese textile factory was a silk factory opened in 1872 in the Canton region by a silk merchant Chen Chi-yuan. But his success was not entirely appreciated by the officials. The attitude towards private entrepreneurship is best represented in a comment made by a local official: “only the public authorities have the right to use machines.”

The ‘wealth and power’ policy led to two major innovations in the fields of communications i.e.: railways and the postal system. In 1863, 27 foreign firms gave a proposal to construct a railway between Shanghai and Suzhou which was rejected as part of an effort to prevent further foreign encroachment. This position changed with the favouring of limited modernization. In 1881 the first Chinese railway, 11 kilometers in length was commissioned to haul coal for the Kaiping Mining company. In 1870-71 foreign companies installed telegraph lines linking Hong Kong, Shanghai and Vladivostok. The introduction of national postal services met with opposition from the officials, the foreigners and the banks and other companies which had a vested interest in a private postal system. The officials feared that the suspension of the official service would seriously endanger official authority. The banks did not want to lose their business. The foreigners who had established their own services in the port cities wanted to retain foreign mail firmly in their own hands.

6.3.1 Beginnings of a Modern Education

The establishment of foreign language schools as part of self-strengthening led to new trends in the field of education. No doubt the innovations were not on a large scale nevertheless they were to lay the foundations of an exposure to non-Chinese ideas which expanded rapidly during the last decades of the 19th century. A small number of schools were opened to train a limited number of men for taking careers as technicians or officials. The Institute of Western knowledge was started in Canton in 1880. In Tianjin, a telegraph school was started in 1880, a naval and army medical school in 1881 and a military academy in 1885. Between 1872-1881, 120 Chinese youth were sent to Hartford in the United States to receive American education. A parallel mission was sent to France in 1876. These programmes were severely criticized for making the participants too westernized.

It is significant that some of the beneficiaries of this education abroad, like Yen Fu played an important part in Chinese intellectual and political life at the end of the century. This policy of officially sponsoring overseas education was given up by 1881.

This happened partly due to the exclusion policy of the United States whereby the US unilaterally suspended Chinese and other Asian immigration in the wake of a strong anti-Chinese movement in California. During the last decades of the 19th century, however, several young Chinese were to seek education abroad.

6.3.2 Opposition to the Innovations

There was sustained opposition to the Self-Strengthening movement in official circles from the beginning. The most prominent of the critics was Wo-jen, a Manchu official who held important positions as tutor to the Emperor and Chairman of the Hanlin Academy. Using Confucian texts Wo-jen tried to argue that science and technology would not resolve the problems of the state. The

controversy, however, remained within manageable limits as long as the Self-Strengthening movement was advocating the making of arms to suppress internal revolts and prevent foreign incursions. The conflict became sharper when innovations were sought to be introduced in other areas like industry, communications and education. The opposition was strengthened by popular resistance to mechanization and the modern economic system. Riots over the introduction of railways were used to argue that the introduction of modern technology endangered law and order. It must be remembered that popular opposition stemmed from both religious beliefs and superstitions as well as from the belief that machines had ruined the livelihood of the people. The conservative reaction, however, was fighting to preserve a traditional state and order, which it feared would be undermined by the new developments. In the long run the fears of Wo-jen and others proved right.

6.3.3 The Results

The major results of the Restoration and the Self Strengthening movements were as follows:

- i) The Restoration reinforced the political and social roles of the gentry.
- ii) Since the state had drawn on the military forces created by the provincial gentry to quell the Taipings and other popular uprisings of the 19th century, the seeds of regional militarism were sown. These new armies were superior to the traditional Imperial army, and potentially were a threat to the state: a threat which was actuated in the early 20th century.
- iii) Historians agree that the state sponsored enterprises illustrate the rise of modern capitalism in China. A striking social development was the emergence of bourgeoisie, officials, compradors, merchants, gentry and landowners.
- iv) New intellectual and literary trends in the form of translations and publications widened the horizons of Chinese intellectuals. Increasingly Chinese scholars were becoming aware that Western knowledge, the base of Western riches and, power, was more than mere technology.

In the final analysis, these efforts met with only short-term results. The aim was not to transform but to preserve with innovations. Power continued in the hands of a small ruling elite. The limitations of the efforts to gain a greater control over foreign relations were sharply belied by the 1880's. Foreign presence, far from being contained, seemed to pervade wider and wider areas of Chinese society during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The Self-Strengthening movement, while it set the ball rolling in initiating Industries and modernization of the Chinese economy, was not really able to strengthen the Chinese economy and state to face the challenges of imperialism or meet the needs of its exploited peasant masses.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write a short note on the system of modern education in about ten lines.

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- 2) What were the results of the Restoration and the Self Strengthening Movement?

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6.4 THE 1898 REFORM MOVEMENT

The Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95 and China's defeat marked the complete failure of the Self-Strengthening movement. The military devastation of China at the hands of the Japanese in Korea laid bare the hollowness of the military modernization. The invasion of foreign industry and capital, in the immediate aftermath of the treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895 which had concluded the Sino-Japanese war further raised questions on the efficacy of official control over economic development. In short it raised several questions relating to the viability of the foreign relations initiated after the Restoration, and the military and economic modernization proposed by the state. Fundamentally it raised the spectre of a dismantled China on the verge of being colonized.

China's defeat by Japan was irrefutable proof of the failure of the Self-Strengthening movement. In this background of expanding foreign interests and what has sometimes been picturesquely called as "the cutting up of the Chinese melon", there was a revival of demands for further reform in a period of intense political unrest.

There were violent reactions to the terms of the treaty of Shimonoseki. The terms were entirely in favour of Japan. China renounced suzerainty over Korea, and ceded Taiwan, Pescadores, and the Liaodong peninsula to the Japanese.

The seeds of questioning Qing authority were already there in the 1890's. In 1894 a secret society, the Revive China Society (Xingzhonghui) was founded by a Cantonese emigrant, Sun Yatsen. Sun tried to organize a rebellion to bring about the fall of the Qing. The plot having been betrayed, Sun took refuge in Japan. At the same time, several thousand gentry protested in a memorial to the throne the cession of the island of Taiwan to the Japanese.

Kang Youwei, a scholar from Guangdong who was in Peking to write the metropolitan examination, penned a 10,000 long character memorial to the Kangxi Emperor (1875-1908). This memorial was signed by 1300 examination graduates who were also in Peking to take the examination. A remarkable document, it had several important demands:

- 1) It urged the Qing state not to ratify the treaty of Shimonoseki and that those responsible for the defeat of China be punished.
- 2) The army was to be more thoroughly reorganized and modernized.
- 3) A host of areas were identified for reform like the monetary and banking system, postal system, etc.
- 4) Government encouragement of private industry and commerce.
- 5) The study of agronomy, modern science and technical subjects.

- 6) The construction of schools and libraries.
- 7) Changes in the examination systems.
- 8) The creation of annually elected councils that would deliberate political and economic matters.

By the time the Kangxi Emperor saw the memorials, the Treaty of Shimonoseki had been signed. The memorials of Kang were circulated to all the provincial governors. A spate of study societies sprang up in the provinces in the cause of the newly proposed reforms.

In 1895 The Society for the Study of National Self Strengthening was started. It organized lectures and distributed material free of cost. In November 1895 the Society was closed on the grounds that it had become a centre of subversive activities. Other societies sprang up in places like Zhili, Shanghai, Hunan and Shaanxi. These reformist ideas gained a wider circulation with the expansion of the press. Between 1896-1898, 25 new journals were published. Among the most influential was the Shihwu Pao (Current Affairs gazette) started in Shanghai by some disciples of Kang Youwei. Kuowen Pao. (The National News) started by Yan Fu, a former graduate of the Fuzhou arsenal, played an equally important part. The most active centres of the reform activity were the regions in the lower Yangzi, Guangdong, Hunan and Zhili.

6.4.1 The Principal Theorists

Here we will discuss about the main theorists of the reform movement.

1) Kang Youwei

The most prominent of the theorists was Kang Youwei (1858-1927). He was born in Nanhai in Guangdong province and received a traditional education. He became acquainted with Western learning when he visited Shanghai and Hong Kong in 1881 and 1879. Kang Youwei's ideas were set out in two major works:

- Study of the Classics forged during the Xin period
- Confucius as a Reformer.

Drawing upon a longstanding debate among Chinese classical scholars of the authenticity of the Chinese Confucian classics, Kang based himself on the new texts of the Han period as being the authentic texts of Confucianism. From this Kang made a radical departure from his contemporaries and the scholars of the Restoration period. He argued that Confucius as represented in the new texts was a fearless innovator and Confucianism far from inhibiting reform and change implicitly allowed change of tradition. Thus Kang's reading of Confucianism allowed for tremendous innovation from within the tradition itself. This was to have a tremendous impact at the end of the 19th century. In another major work the Datungshu (Book of Great Unity), Kang developed a Utopian vision which in its final phases would lead to the disappearance of all inequalities and governments, a time in which humanity lived in harmony and happiness.

Kang's contribution, however, lay in his ability to place the demands of reform within the Chinese tradition itself. In many respects Kang was no different from the leaders of the Yangwu movement. Despite his original interpretation of Confucianism as a reforming ideology, he remained committed to abiding Confucian values and to the role of the elite in the regeneration of China. His

appeal to the elite was to accept a leadership role and direct the reform and change from above. He was convinced that the Emperor could play the same role that the Meiji Emperor in Japan and Peter the Great in Russia played in initiating a state controlled and directed reform.

2) Yan Fu and Tan Sitong

Yan Fu played a critical role in disseminating ideas of Western thought through his translations of Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Herbert Spencer's *A Study of Sociology*. Using the arguments of Darwin, Yan Fu argued for a more thorough re-examination of China and suggested that in the new political reality of the world only the strong would survive. Though not directly involved in politics, Yan Fu's translations had a long lasting impact.

Tan Sitong (1865-1898) more directly condemned not only the conservatism of the ruling class, the Confucian moral codes, but more significantly the Manchu domination of the Chinese. This last theme of Manchu versus Chinese was to become central to the nationalist activity at the end of the nineteenth century which ultimately led to the Chinese Revolution of 1911.

6.4.2 The Ascendancy

With the rapid expansion of imperialist interests in the creation of spheres of influence, the collapse of China seemed imminent. The Western powers carved up China into mutually recognized sphere of influence: A process over which the Qing had little control.

It is in this context that Kang addressed his fifth memorial to the Guangxu Emperor urging political reform and arguing that it was the only way left to save China and the dynasty. Kang's memorials now were allowed to reach the Emperor. On June 11, 1898 an edict from the Kuangshu Emperor announcing reforms marked the beginning of this reform effort.

6.5 THE HUNDRED DAYS REFORM

The name derives from the fact that the reform drive lasted about 103 days between June 11 to September 16 of 1898. Kang and his associates were summoned to Peking to help in the programme. Kang was appointed as Secretary of the Zongli Yamen.

6.5.1 The Scope of Reform

The royal edicts covered a wide range of subjects like administration, education and the economy. A large number of sinecures and posts were eliminated and subsidies paid to all Manchus were abolished. In a radical departure from traditional practice, all officials and subjects were allowed to address suggestions directly to the Emperor. This was an effort to bring the Emperor out of his ivory tower and to bring him directly in contact with the people. Old academies were transformed into schools. Peking University was founded and science and politics were included as examination subjects.

The examination system itself was sought to be modernized by abolishing the eight legged essay. This essay form was a rigid style of essay writing which over the centuries became more concerned with form and style rather than with the content of writing.

Offices were created to introduce a modern legal system and to streamline the financial management of the state. Ministries were created to supervise agriculture, industry and trade. Plans were made to regulate provincial economies and to start chambers of commerce.

These measures were not intended to overthrow the power of the state. Nevertheless they created enough anxiety among a host of people, Manchu and Chinese officials and Scholars “who had devoted a life time preparing for the examinations were now worried of their status under the new examination and education systems.

6.5.2 The Reaction

The opponents of the reform movement found a staunch supporter in the Expresses Dowager Cixi. With the help of Yuan Shikai the Imperial general held the Kangxi Emperor prisoner and on September 21, 1898 arrested all the reformist leaders. Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, his close associate and disciple, fled abroad. Tan Sitong and five other reformers were executed. Tan had refused to go abroad and had stated: “in other countries no reform has ever been accomplished without bloodshed. No one has yet shed any blood for it in China. I shall be the first.”

All the reform measures were revoked except for the edict founding the University of Peking.

There were several contradictions within the reform effort itself. The reformers focused exclusively on the elite ruling classes of China. The proposed political reforms themselves would have continued to serve the interests of the ruling elites. Agriculture, the mainstay of the society, received no attention. The reformers avowed resistance to foreign encroachments seemed to contradict the westernization they advocated. But at the same time we have to appreciate that the prime concern of the reformists was to initiate such measures that would check imperialist aggression. Moreover the reformists did strike at the feudal system and ideology. Though the struggle was a limited one, people in increasing numbers turned towards new learning and there was a growing demand for democracy. In spite of the repressive measures, taken by Empress Dowager Cixi, the ideological impact of the reform measures could not be liquidated. Rather it intensified the struggle between the traditional order and the new learning.

The 1898 Reform movement had to have a penetrating impact on various groups of people. One group of reformers became convinced of gradual political reform within the political tradition and its edifice. Others became convinced of the total inability of the Qing to address the problems of China and extended this disillusionment to the polity and its major institution the Imperial system. To these latter groups, who during the early 20th century gathered both support and momentum, nothing short of a revolution was the answer.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Who were the major theorists of the Reform Movement? State their views in about ten lines.

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- 2) Discuss in about ten lines the reactions to the Hundred Days Reforms.

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6.6 LET US SUM UP

During the third quarter of nineteenth century the Chinese state governed by the Qing rulers was facing a severe crisis and were virtually on the decline. The imperialist expansion and the internal disturbances brought the state into a situation of apparent collapse. In order to overcome this crisis the Qing state and government embarked upon a programme of reforms. Scholars of this period considered this particular reformative period as an era of 'restoration'. Since this period (1862-71) includes the reign of Tongzhi that is the reason why this phase is known as the Tongzhi Restoration.

The Tongzhi Restoration was not mainly aimed at establishing the old order but had the purpose of creating a new programme to meet the crisis raised by the rebellious groups and challenges from outside. Self-Strengthening Movement was a corollary of restoration. Its essence lay in minimal modernizing policy.

Restoration of agrarian economy and state administration were carried out with sincerity. Overall, peasantry as a social group was never helped by this policy. The principles of Confucian political economy were emphasized. The State's civil administration was restored mainly by the efficient officers taken from the examination system. The bureaucracy was streamlined in the mould of a Confucian state. The political and administrative structures of the state were consolidated through ideological learning and Confucian knowledge.

The second phase of this period was marked by certain efforts on the part of Chinese to raise their country to a status of wealth and power. Though some semblances of economic growth had appeared, still it could not attain its results because the Tongzhi Restoration did not encourage much in terms of developing traditional trade. However, this period saw some major innovations in Chinese society. Communication networks improved during this period. But the efforts to develop these facilities invited opposition also. Most of the leaders and statesmen believed that the introduction of steamships, building of railways and the telegraph system would hamper the domestic economy and social order; all these innovations would put a serious threat to the State's security.

China's defeat in the war against Japan produced a wide range of reactions among the Chinese People. After the war the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed in 1895, which produced more devastating results. Virtually, the entire polity was shaken and led to the extent of being colonized. However, at the time of crisis all the leaders showed their unanimity and made determined efforts for a political change.

The first attempt made by Sun Yatsen in creating a secret organization for the fall of Qing dynasty did not work out.

The entire plot was betrayed. Secondly, Kang Youwei's proposal for reorganizing the polity did not produce satisfactory results. With the rapid expansion of imperialist powers in the country, the collapse of China almost looked imminent.

In this state of crisis Kang and other principal theorists of the movement could visualize that political reforms were the only way to save China. The Hundred

Days Reforms cover a wide range of subjects giving much emphasis on administration, education and the economy. However, these measures were not carried out to over-throw the power of the state. On the contrary, it received much reaction from various sections of the society. Its reasons for failure are many and varied. The autocratic and oppressive measures taken by the leaders damaged the careers of many scholars. The reformists in power took no measures in stopping the encroachment of foreigners. Hence, its failure was inevitable. Though the entire reform movement was transitory, but attempt of Hundred Days left a mark on the country. It provided a vision at least to the educated people in search of a political change.

6.7 KEY WORDS

Encroachment : To intrude gradually upon rights.

Sinecure : A paid office or post involving minimal duties.

6.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The two major policy components were restoration of Qing power and Self-strengthening. The main purpose of these was to restore the power and prestige of the State and indulge in limited modernization. See Sec. 6,2
- 2) Many attempts were carried out by the Tongzhi restoration to streamline the administration. Improvement of bureaucracy was taken up by recruiting 'men of talent'. Officers were needed with all round competence. The political and administrative structures were consolidated through ideological learning giving emphasis on Confucianism. See Sub-section 6.2.3.
- 3) Tongwen Guan were foreign language schools. These schools were set up to give instruction and knowledge about technical subjects and Western languages. See Sub-section 6.2.4.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The opening of foreign language school as a part of Self strengthening created new trends in the field of education. They developed an exposure to non-Chinese and Western ideas and made careers for men as technicians or officials. See Sub-section 6.3.1.
- 2) The restoration reinforced the political and social roles of the gentry. New intellectual and literary trends expanded the knowledge of Chinese. See Sub-section 6.3.3.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Kang Youwei, Yan Fu and Tan Sitong are major theorists of the Reform Movement. Kang preached Confucianism. See Section 6.4.
- 2) The Hundred Days Reforms was severely criticised by Yuan Shikai and reaction was strong. The reformists were arrested and some of them fled away. All the reform measures were revoked except the edict founding the University of Peking. See Section 6.5.