

# The Influence of the Meiji Restoration on the 1898 Reform of China\*

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By the Meiji Restoration and later reforms Japan changed rapidly from a feudal country to a modern state. K'ang Yu-wei, who led China's reform movement in 1898, observed in his first memorial to the Throne in October 1888 that since Japan had become powerful within a few years of the Meiji Restoration, China, with its much greater resources, should also be able to become a strong country quickly if she would but undertake reforms<sup>1</sup>. In the wake of China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, K'ang Yu-wei intensified his demands for political reform. In the many memorials which he presented to the government, K'ang never failed to extol the achievements of the Meiji Restoration. His plans for political reform, which he proposed to model after the Meiji example, included (1) the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, (2) the creation of a parliament, and (3) the formation of a modern capitalist economy. It is true that the Meiji leaders did achieve great success in these three areas. K'ang Yu-wei, emphasizing these three points mainly, attempted to construct a modern state like Meiji Japan.

In this way the early Meiji experience greatly influenced the reform of 1898 in China. I believe, however, that the differences of the two reforms are far more numerous than the similarities. What I wish to do in this paper, therefore, is to focus on the basic differences of the ideas and democratic thought of the two reforms and examine their historical background.

## Basic Nature of the Reform Ideas

The spirit of the Meiji Restoration is expressed best by the words "revere the Emperor" (*sonnō*)<sup>[1]</sup>. Revering the Emperor was originally joined with the idea of expelling the Western barbarians (*jōi*)<sup>[2]</sup>. As is well known, the later Mito<sup>[3]</sup> school first used the words *sonnō*, *jōi*<sup>2</sup>. But revering the Emperor soon came to mean the same thing as overthrowing the *bakufu* (*tobaku*)<sup>[4]</sup>. When the *tobaku* idea first reared its head in the 1860's, it frustrated plans for closer cooperation between the Court and the *bakufu* which the Emperor and the *shōgun* had worked out, and presented an opportunity for the two most anti-*bakufu* *han*, Chōshū<sup>[5]</sup> and Satsuma<sup>[6]</sup>, to seize the leadership of all the *han*. On the other hand, both Chōshū and Satsuma realized after the

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<sup>1</sup> K'ang Yu-wei, *Nan-hai hsien-sheng ssu-shang-shu chi*, "Ti-i shu" (First Memorial), pp. 6—14; Mai Chung-hua, *Huang-ch'ao Ching-shih-wen hsien-pien*, Vol. I. pp. 1—3.

<sup>2</sup> Motoyama Yukihiko, *Meiji shisō no keisei* (The Formation of Meiji Thought), p. 20, Tokyo, 1969.

[1] 尊王 [2] 攘夷 [3] 水戸 [4] 倒幕 [5] 長州  
[6] 薩摩

British bombarded Kagoshima in 1863 and the combined naval expedition of Britain, France, America and Holland destroyed the shore batteries at Shimonoseki in 1864, that they could no longer oppose the Western powers by military means. These domestic and international developments transformed the Meiji Restoration's *sonnō, jōi* into *sonnō, tobaku*.

China's reforms of 1898 were influenced by the Meiji Restoration, but there was no strong respect for the Emperor, as there had been in Japan during the Restoration, which could provide a foundation for the reform movement. China's feudal order never had the kind of complex political structure that the Tokugawa system had with the Emperor, the bakufu and the *daimyō* domains; rather, China's centralized political system placed the Emperor at the center as the highest feudal authority. All high officials were appointed directly by the Emperor and had to obey his orders absolutely. In China, therefore, there was no *bakufu* which had to be overthrown; thus the Emperor could not find a new recognition and respect by destroying an unpopular government.

In Japan, the *sonnō, tobaku* idea is what destroyed the Tokugawa *bakufu*'s feudal system and established a modern central government with the Emperor at the center. After the Meiji Government was formed, a group of young Chōshu and Satsuma samurai took the reins of government into their own hands. Possessing a more progressive spirit than the old *bakufu* officials and impressed by the modern Western civilisation, they devoted all their efforts to introduced Western political, economic and educational institutions.

Japan's *jōi* ideas thus changed to revering the Emperor and overthrowing the *bakufu*. China's *jōi* ideas, however, gave birth to no more than the movement to introduce Western industry into China. After the Opium War of 1840, Wei Yuan, a leading Chinese thinker who wrote *Hai-kuo T'u-chih* (An Illustrated Handbook of Maritime Countries) advocated his own *jōi* strategy of "using barbarians to control the barbarians"<sup>3</sup> by studying and using Western science and technology against the Western nations. After suffering defeats at the hands of the Franco-British forces in the wars of 1857 and 1859, China set up the *Tsungli Yamen* (Board of Foreign Affairs) in Peking in 1861 to improve relations with the Western nations and to introduce modern science and technology. This was the high point of the industrialization movement. But China's Westernization was concerned almost exclusively with Western science and technology and brought about virtually no change in China's feudalistic traditional political structure.

Japan won an overwhelming victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894. But one might say that rather than beating China with military power, Japan defeated her with modern institutions. K'ang Yu-wei and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, shocked by that defeat, criticized the industrialization movement; they believed that unless the government undertook thorough reform, as Japan had done after the Meiji Restoration, it would be virtually impossible to

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<sup>3</sup> Wei Yuan, "Hai-kuo T'u-chih hsü" (The introduction to "An Illustrated Handbook of Maritime Countries"), 1842.

rescue China from its deepening crisis<sup>4</sup>. The reforms of 1898 followed swiftly. But although following the Meiji model, the reformers could not reproduce the social conditions and historical background that existed in Japan at the time of the Restoration. As I have already said, the Restoration was a set of changes that occurred under the slogan of "revere the Emperor and overthrow the *bakufu*". These changes overturned the feudal *bakufu* and created the new Meiji Government. The reforms of 1898 in China, on the other hand, were carried out by a group of progressive intellectuals without real power who persuaded the Kuang Hsü Emperor to proclaim these superficial reforms while leaving the traditional system undisturbed. The reforms were not only out of touch with reality but the entire plan, contained in 67 government ordinances issued during the "hundred days" (June 11—September 21), was blocked by conservative bureaucrats and amounted to little more than scraps of paper<sup>5</sup>. In addition, the real power in the government, Dowager Empress Tz'u Hsi, would never permit radical reforms which posed a threat to the political position and special privileges of the Manchu nobles. It was thus no easy task to advance the reform movement in the face of this powerful reactionary force. In short, any reform was absolutely impossible to introduce without first overthrowing the traditional feudal system. If the Restoration had preserved the complex feudal system of Tokugawa Japan it is doubtful whether the Meiji leaders could have had any real chance of success.

#### *Democratic Thought*

Constitutional monarchy is one expression of democratic ideas. The ultimate goal of K'ang Yu-wei's political reforms of 1898 was to establish a political monarchy like Japan's. In 1898 he presented to the Kuang Hsü Emperor a copy of his book *Jih-pen Ming-chih pien-cheng k'ao* (On the Meiji Political Reforms). K'ang's account was based mainly on information he had acquired from an English missionary, Timothy Richard; an American missionary, Allen J. Young; and from his reading of Huang Tsun-hsien's *Jih-pen kuo-chih* (Japanese History)<sup>6</sup>. China's notions of constitutional monarchy were thus related to Japan's.

In 1868 the Meiji Government issued the Five-Article Charter Oath in which the concepts of constitutional and parliamentary government were first hinted at by an article which says that "all matters shall be decided by open discussion". In the years that followed, many Japanese scholars were actively concerned with modern Western thought and were striving to introduce it as rapidly as possible. John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* was translated by Nakamura Masanao<sup>[7]</sup> in 1871; following this, the ideas of Montesquieu.

<sup>4</sup> K'ANG Yu-wei, "Shang Ch'ing-ti ti-i shu" (The First Memorial to the Ch'ing Emperor), Oct. 1888; "Liang Ch'i-ch'ao shang Ch'en Pao-chen shu" (A letter to Ch'en Pao-chen from LIANG Ch'i-ch'ao), see LIANG Ch'i-ch'ao, *Wu-hsü cheng-pien chi*, Vol. VIII, pp. 1—10.

<sup>5</sup> PENG Tse-zhou, "K'ang Yu-wei's Reform Movement and the Meiji Restoration", see *The Zinbun Gakuhō* Vol. 30, March 1970.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 176—187.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, Herbert Spencer, Adam Smith and others were introduced. These modern English and French doctrines, entering Japan in a disorderly fashion, formed the intellectual background of the movement for liberty and people's rights in the early Meiji period. The ideas of Mill and Spencer found favor with gradualist advocates of democratic thought, while Rousseau appealed more to intellectuals of a radical persuasion. The ideological debate between these two groups was concerned with whether an English style constitutional monarchy should be introduced into Japan, or whether the French republican system of democracy was more appropriate. This question was never raised during China's reforms of 1898.

Although Japan's early Meiji intellectuals had received a Confucian education, they realized the impactuality of Confucianism, and made every effort to adopt the modern civilization of the West as the best way of modernizing Japanese society. Kato Hiroyuki<sup>[8]</sup>, who introduced Western constitutional thought to Japan, pointed out that Meng-tzu's "Chün-ch'ing min-kuei lun"<sup>[9]</sup> (the theory that the Ruler serves the people) was by no means democratic because Meng-tzu considered the country and the people private possessions of the ruler<sup>8</sup>. Fukazawa Yukichi<sup>[10]</sup>, who was influenced by Mill and Spencer, denounced Confucianism as an abstract theory of morality which had no connection with man's daily life and which not only contributed nothing to the advancement of humanity but actually was a hindrance to it<sup>9</sup>. Despite Nakae Chōmin's<sup>[11]</sup> deep respect for Confucianism, the source of his democratic ideas are to be found in Rousseau's liberty and equality<sup>10</sup>. Fukuzawa and Nakae played major roles in advancing the movement for liberty and people's rights in the early Meiji period. Democratic thought of modern Japan was thus developed by many with positive ideas to offer.

K'ang Yu-wei and others in China tried to copy Japan's constitutional monarchy, but they could not match the Japanese understanding of modern Western democratic ideas. Although the ideas of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer and Mill, as interpreted by Yen Fu, had a major impact on China's reformers before 1898, these Western ideas were not the principal intellectual force of the 1898 reform movement. K'ang Yu-wei merely used Huxley's and Spencer's concept of historical evolution to reinterpret Confucius in his *K'ung-tzu kai-chih k'ao* (On Confucius as a Reformer, 1897). In this book he advocated the thesis of a political system in historical progression from absolutism to constitutional monarchy, and from constitutional monarchy to democratic

<sup>7</sup> See Meng-tzu chin-hsin p'ien, *Hsia-ch'uan*.

<sup>8</sup> Kato Hiroyuki, "Kokutai shinron" (A new theory of national constitution), see *Meiji bunka Zenshū*, Vol. II, pp. 111-126, Tokyo, 1963.

<sup>9</sup> FUKUZAWA Yukichi, *Fukuzawa Zenshū* (Complete works of Fukuzawa), Vol. IX, pp. 280-283, Tokyo, 1926.

<sup>10</sup> KUWABARA Takeo, *Nakae Chōmin no kenkyū* (Studies on Nakae Chōmin), p. 98, Tokyo, 1966.

republicanism<sup>11</sup>. His principal objective was to root out the retrogressive Confucian view of history, which Chinese intellectuals had heretofore accepted, that political institutions had degenerated from the Hsia to the Shang, and from the Shang to the Chou dynasty. This reveals the progressiveness of K'ang Yu-wei's ideas. But ideas that were rooted in Confucianism, as his were, could not escape the fact that, conceptually, they were pre-modern.

By the time of the 1898 reforms, K'ang's "thought of the great harmony" was already well established. This was composed of a confused mixture of ideas from Confucianism, the philosophy of Lao-tzu, Buddhism, and Christianity. This can hardly be called scientific, democratic thought. It was, in fact, a kind of utopianism. To make clear K'ang's ideas on constitutional monarchy, his disciple Liang Ch'i-ch'ao published an article in 1896 called "Ku i-yuan k'ao" <sup>[12]</sup> <sup>12</sup> (Textual Research on Ancient Parliament) based on Meng-tzu. Liang pointed out that Meng-tzu's *Chu ta-fu* <sup>[13]</sup> (great officers of state in ancient times) were equivalent to the upper house of parliament in Western countries, and his *kuo-jen* <sup>[14]</sup> (people) were like the lower house. In other words, the ideas of modern parliamentary government were contained in Confucianism.

T'an Ssu-t'ung, who was more progressive than K'ang and Liang, advocated radical democratic ideas in his *Jen-hsueh* (1897). His ideas closely resembled those of Rousseau, but he was actually in no way influenced by Rousseau<sup>13</sup>. T'an's ideas were constructed from the theories of Wang Ch'uan-shan and Wei Yuan, to which he added a knowledge of Western natural science<sup>14</sup>. But Confucianism remained the real basis of his thought.

The ideas which supported China's feudal order were Confucian. Confucianism was encouraged and protected in Japan during the Tokugawa period. After the *bakufu* collapsed, however, most Japanese intellectuals rejected Confucianism and positively sought out the modern thought of the West. In contrast to this, Chinese intellectuals, while attempting to carry out the kind of reforms that Japan had implemented earlier, neither rejected traditional Confucianism nor made a very significant criticism of it. They did nothing more than use Western democratic thought to suggest new, and

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<sup>11</sup> After the *K'ung-tzu kai-chih k'ao* was published, indeed, it aroused even more excitement and deeply influenced the 1898 Reform Movement of China. Liang Ch'i-ch'ao pointed out that this book was like "a volcanic eruption" and "a mighty earthquake" (see LIANG's *Ch'ing-tai hsueh-shu kai-lun*), that means Chinese traditional thought would be destroyed by the idea of progressive Confucianism of this book.

<sup>12</sup> LIANG Ch'i-ch'ao, *Yin-ping shih wen-chi* (Collected essays of the Ice-Drinker's Studio), I Ch'uan, pp. 94—96, Shanghai, 1925.

<sup>13</sup> LIANG Ch'i-ch'ao, *Ch'ing-tai hsueh-shu kai-lun*, p. 96, Taiwan, Commercial Press, 1966. Liang writes: "Although T'an never even dreamed of Rousseau's Social Contract, his democratic ideas closely approached Rousseau's thought".

<sup>14</sup> YANG Jung-kuo, *T'an Ssu-t'ung che-hsueh ssu-hsiang* (T'an Ssu-t'ung's philosophical thought), Peking, 1957.

often strained, interpretations of Confucianism. Herein lies one cause for the failure of the 1898 reforms.

The Meiji reforms succeeded in introducing new and modern democratic ideas into Japan and a modern political structure based on these ideas. So long as the traditional feudalistic ideas of Confucianism existed in China, real reform was impossible. China had to wait for the May Fourth Movement of 1919 to reject Confucian doctrines. To introduce such new ideas as, for example, Pragmatism and Marxism, and to bring about a thorough reform of the country<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Wu Yü, *Wu Yü wen-lu* (Collected essays of Wu Yü); Hu Shih, *Hu Shih wen-ts'un* (Collected essays of Hu Shih), Shanghai, 1930; Li Ta-chao, "My View of Marxism", see *Hsin Ch'ing-nien*, May 1919.