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### Education and Nationalism in Late Imperial China

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Modern Chinese nationalism emerged and developed in the final decades of late Qing China, being closely linked to the threat of Western imperialism. The Opium War of the 1840s gave rise to the Self-Strengthening Movement in the late 19th century and initiated a reform process in which modern nationalist ideas began to form. The defeat of China by Japan in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 inspired calls for further reforms. It is generally understood that the war played a significant role in the early history of modern Chinese nationalism. The war activated nationalistic sentiments that had gradually taken form since the Opium War. Yan Fu's (1854–1921) translation of Thomas Henry Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* spread the social Darwinism message and added fuel to the *awakening call*. The Chinese elite regarded education as the key for awakening the Chinese people. In their view, education was crucial to the survival of the nation and to the creation of a new China. Meanwhile, Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the founding father of the Republic of China, initiated his revolutionary attempt to overthrow the Manchu government.

This entry examines the rise of nationalism in China, the growing demand for Chinese interpreters and interpreter training schools in the mid-19th century, subsequent modern reforms, and the role missionaries, government officials, and scholars played in the establishment of China's national education system.

## The Rise of Nationalism in China

In this formative stage of modern Chinese nationalism, the Chinese elite by and large abandoned the traditional dogma of China as the center of the world (*tianxia*) and Chinese culture as a set of universal values. Instead, they adopted the philosophy of a modern nation-state system and espoused the concepts of territorial sovereignty and national equality in order to oppose the aggression of Western powers. Equipped with such principles of nationalism, both reformers and revolutionary advocates formed a common nationalist quest for China's regeneration, calling for an end to the humiliation imposed upon China by Western Powers. Nevertheless, they differed significantly in the means by which this nationalistic goal should be achieved. The elite reformers attempted to realize their dream of *fuguo qiangbing* (enrich the state and strengthen its military power) by implementing a series of reform measures via the Guangxu emperor (1871–1908), while the revolutionaries held firmly to their anti-Manchu stance (*paiman*).

Despite competing ideologies and nationalistic programs, anti-imperialism and the search for national salvation characterized nationalism during this early period. Liang Qichao (1873–1929), one of the most influential thinkers of the time, understood that nationalism was the driving force of the modern imperial power which utilized the strength of its citizens to expand its boundaries to other nations by means of military power, commerce, industry, or religion. In his view, nationalistic imperialism represented the expansion of a whole nation instead of a certain emperor and would, therefore, have a long-lasting effect on the world. The writings of other reform advocates, sharing similar views with Liang Qichao, cited Western civilizations and colonial history to illustrate their interpretation of social Darwinism and race theory, through which they conveyed the message that weak nations would be eliminated if they did not act assertively to develop their own nationalism. They urged the Chinese people to awaken to the reality of imperialism; otherwise China as a nation would be ruined.

In this argument, education was emphasized as having a key role in the development of Chinese nationalism. Historically education had always been considered important. However, traditional Chinese education focused only on the ancient Chinese classics and encouraged the literati to devote their energy to climbing the examination ladder in order to enter officialdom. The narrow focus on Confucian study failed to provide young talent with the incentives to pursue broad and practical knowledge. Many reformers believed this was largely responsible for China's backwardness in the development of technology, military prowess, and industrialization. The crisis China faced called for *changes and reforms in education*.

## Schools for Interpreters

In the wake of the Opium War, the Qing government opened schools for the training of interpreters necessitated by the sudden increase in foreign interaction. Notably, Beijing Tongwen guan was established in 1862; then in 1866, it was elevated to a college with a new scientific department. Later Shanghai and Canton followed suit and set up similar colleges. Under government auspices, various types of technical and professional schools were established as part of the self-strengthening program.

Meanwhile, the time-honored examination system also underwent some changes in order to align with the newly modified curricula. Mathematics was viewed as the foundation of all practical learning and thus was added to the content of the civil service examinations in 1869. The Sino-French War of 1883–1885 over Vietnam revealed the inadequacy of China's modernization efforts, resulting in the limited introduction of natural sciences into the examination system in 1887.

## Modern Reforms

While the period from 1895 to 1905 marked the rise of modern nationalism in China, it also accelerated the pace of reform. Prior to the 1898 Reform Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909), one of the most famous government officials in the late Qing government, published his famous *Quan xue pian* (An Exhortation to Learning) outlining a complete school system with purported curricula from primary grades to university courses, embracing a mixture of Chinese classics and the modern learning of the West. He advocated the abolishment of the *eight-legged essay* and suggested converting Buddhist and Taoist temples into modern schools. Zhang's proposed reforms in education to some extent were agreeable with the reform measures proposed by Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao, the two leaders of the 1898 Reform. The Guangxu emperor at the time issued a series of decrees, attempting to implement all the reform measures advocated by both official reformers such as Zhang Zhidong, and scholar-reformers such as Kang and Liang. Despite this support, the 1898 Reform only lasted for 100 days.

Although the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) had fiercely opposed the changes proposed in the 1898 Reform, in the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, she was forced to continue the reforms and decree reform measures that were even more comprehensive than those of 1898. In 1902, the first draft of the new regulations on education envisaged a modern Chinese school system; later, Zhang Zhidong was summoned to revise the draft. In 1904, the regulations were proclaimed, and in the following year, the civil service examination system was officially abolished. The two events marked the end of traditional Chinese education and the birth of a modern school system.

The transition from traditional to modern education originated in the wake of the Opium War and ended with the abolition of the time-honored civil examination system in 1905. During this period, key historical events, such as the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, the 1898 Reform, and the 1900 Boxer Rebellion, contributed critically to the emergence and development of the nationalist programs in which educational reform was a significant component. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904 further accentuated the progress of the reforms. *The survival of the fittest* as a key message of the Chinese version of social Darwinism helped promote educational reforms which were seen as a critical component to the survival of China. Within 18 months of the end of the Sino-Japanese War, demand for the new learning became so great that modern schools, regardless of whether they were under government or mission auspices or private control, emerged to accommodate eager students. Many elite/literati traveled to Japan attempting to discover the secrets behind the Japanese success. Many educated Chinese believed that China could and would achieve what Japan had accomplished. In the period from 1905 to 1911, China's modern educational system was constructed with some success. Nevertheless, the 1911 Revolution took place and brought down the Qing dynasty in response to dissatisfac-

tion with a perceived slow pace of government change toward modernizing China.

## Missionaries, Government Officials, and Scholars

Missionaries were the pioneers of modern education in China and their schools were essentially unrivaled compared to late Qing government efforts. Although the achievement of Protestant missionaries in the promotion of secular education in China was not acknowledged in the 1904 regulations, missionary school curricula had exerted considerable influence on Chinese educational reforms, and their textbooks in science subjects were directly adopted as part of official teaching manuals for new schools.

Both government and scholar reformers promoted a new educational system with a focus on the expansion of modern primary schooling. This policy was in the first place determined to address the low literacy rates among the Chinese population. Universal education was viewed by the Chinese elite as a strong factor behind the successes of Western countries and key to the formation of a modern nation. Furthermore, they sincerely believed that mass education was critical to the awakening of Chinese people and essential to the survival of the Chinese nation. In his book *Xinmin shuo (The New Citizen)*, Liang Qichao said that modern national powers were derived from the energies of individuals and societies; in order to build a modern nation, the Chinese needed to renew themselves through education. In a social Darwinian world, he argued, the adoption of new armies, technology, and political institutions was not enough to ensure the survival of China; the failure of the self-strengthening program had already proved this point. A new kind of Chinese populace was a fundamental requirement for China to move into modernization. He believed that this could only be accomplished through modernizing educational programs which, in turn, would help renew the Chinese mass to become qualified citizens of a new China.

With a focus on the expansion of primary education, the Chinese elites linked the education of children to the fate of China. Children as a youthful hope for a modern nation were recognized as a critical aspect of the nationalistic program that encouraged children to be aware of China's crisis and urged them to take responsibility and save China from being colonized by Western powers and Japan. Many history, geography, and Chinese language textbooks produced during this period were designed as the vehicles to *save China from perishing* and were infused with a Chinese patriotism and nationalism that combined race theory and social Darwinism. Utilizing nationalistic ideas, the textbook writers and educators aimed to inspire young students to undertake the task of erasing China's humiliation imposed by imperialism and to create a new China. From this perspective, the intention of universal education was to nurture a young generation who would become the builders of a modern nation.

**See also** [Darwin, Charles](#); [Education](#); [Spencer, Herbert](#)

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