

SELF-STRENGTHENMENT MOVEMENT AND 100 DAYS REFORMS THROUGH CLASSICAL ELITES THEORY

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Abstract: The paper used the comparative case study model to test the assumptions of classical elite theory. Analyzing the Chinese reformation attempt during the Qing dynasty revealed the limited scope of actions of the leaders. The existence of national elites limits their political environment. However, leaders' motivations and strategies can vary by choosing different factions. Analyzing such relations is the key to understanding why reformation was carried out or not successfully. Theoretical test of classical elites' assumptions revealed that they can explain how elites keep the power, but further elaboration is needed whether reforms can succeed or fail.

Keywords: Qing Dynasty, Dowager Cixi, Guangxu, Classical Elites Theory

INTRODUCTION

Chinese history offers an array of helpful material for theoretical exploration. Although widespread concepts and theories nowadays revolve around the U.S.-China rivalry and multipolarism, theoretical explanations of Chinese history are not very popular. In this paper, I will utilize the classical elites theory to explain China's reformation attempts during the Qing dynasty. Several authors have attempted to illuminate the phenomena surrounding China's failed reformation period. This question has intrigued authors who compare China and Japan (Han, 2017). While China was embroiled in the chaos of civil war, Japan thrived, transforming into a great power. According to studies, several factors impeded reforms in China. While some blame individuals like Dowager Cixi (Channel, 2022), others argue against Confucianism and bureaucracy (Elman, *Naval Warfare and the Refraction of China's Self-Strengthening Reforms into Scientific and Technological Failure, 1865-1895*, 2004).

In this paper, I will debate that, despite the initial success in explaining the Qing political system, the classical elites theory—propagated by its founders, Pareto, Mosca, and Michels—has several shortcomings. On a positive note, the theory offers various systematic analysis tools. For instance, its primary focus on elites provides a way of assessing different individuals and the motivations behind them, allowing for a more comprehensive view of the parochial and vested interests that elites possess. Secondly, the theory presents a well-defined hypothesis (Burnham, *The Machiavellians*, 1943). However, it fails to acknowledge the nexus between leaders, elites, and counter-elites. Consequently, we cannot fully understand why the reformation failed or how the leaders' characters played a significant role. I aim to address this gap by analyzing the strategies and stances of Dowager Cixi and Emperor Guangxu between elites and counter-elites.

This paper will contribute to the vast body of political, historical, and cultural studies on transformation and transition. Firstly, I assume that elites are the most critical actors in political dynamics. By studying political elites, we can observe how even political leaders recognized

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their power's limits by alienating or aligning with different factions. Secondly, leaders matter. The emphasis will be on their strategies and motivations.

The paper is organized as follows: First, I will examine the classical elites hypothesis and deduce expectations from the theory. Next, I will conceptualize the definition of elites. Following this, I will briefly introduce two reformation cases, including their results and achievements. The third part of the paper reflects on testing theories, followed by the fourth part, which presents the research findings and limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The classical elite theory stems from Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes (Pakulski, 2018). However, a more profound and systematized version of the theory is offered by Italian thinkers Mosca, Pareto, and Michels. These thinkers were collectively opposed to the central tenets of democracy, particularly one of its most attractive principles—the rule of the majority. Though their perspectives diverged slightly, they all regarded elites as the cornerstone of the concept and theory.

Pareto offered a dichotomy of society by dividing it into groups of elites and non-elites. He further differentiated between governing and non-governing elites within the elite group (Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, 1935, 83. 1423). Moreover, he reflects Machiavelli's ideas by introducing another dichotomy within the elites: lions and foxes, with the latter being more conservative, standing on values, the military, and religion.

Pareto's most crucial contribution remains his notion of elite circulation, derived from his system analysis of historical records. According to him, history is fundamentally the history of elite circulations. The governing class allows the latter to join and maintain equilibrium between the "A" and "B" elites. Alternatively, more violent methods, such as force or social revolution, may be employed. The governing elite eliminates or assimilates potential individuals who pose a threat to prevent the latter.

Mosca's thoughts on elites continue Pareto's views. Simply put, it is a matter of ruling and being ruled. The main difference between Mosca and Pareto is that the former sees the ruling class as more organized, with the latter's influence exerting pressure on the former (Mosca, 1939, 83. 51). However, the ruling class possesses specific attributes (Mosca, 1939, 83. 53) and they can decay if they cannot provide high-level administrators, such as governors or military officers, as seen in the cases of the Roman or Venetian elites (Mosca, 1939, 83. 66).

For Michels, the masses' psychology is crucial to the elites' existence. The masses always need guidance, and such psychosocial factors require leaders with specific characteristics. For him, the structure of political organization does not matter; the "iron law of oligarchy" applies to all. Contrary to Mosca and Pareto's descriptions of elite circulation, Michels argues that it is a battle between old and new elites for power. Rarely are old elites eliminated; change typically brings a reorganization (Michels, 1915).

Interestingly, they paid little attention to China. Pareto briefly mentions China, noting that the country was essentially free from external invasions that would have consolidated cohesive elites (Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, 1935, 83. 1828). He compares Chinese elites to pacifists who intellectually conquered the country (Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, 1935, 83. 1557) yet he labels mandarins the worst rulers without further elaboration.

Mosca also mentions China's uninterrupted development process, noting a significant transformation in elite rule from feudal to bureaucratic (Mosca, 1939, 83. 36). In China, the elites embodied the "mandate," which he refers to as a general political formula. (Mosca, 1939, 83. 407). Notably, none of the classical elitists discuss the Chinese Reformation in depth. Mosca briefly notes that the bureaucracy, rooted in old values and traditions, resisted the inclusion of people with European knowledge.

For other scholars focusing on China, we can identify several trajectories in Chinese studies, such as: ideological, Western-centered, culturalist, and Sino-centric approaches. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses, depending on the researcher's perspective. For instance, Philip Huang used the "paradox approach," emphasizing that China developed along a path different from Marx's and Weber's expectations (Huang P. , 1998).

Conversely, Anglophone academic transition theories often misrepresent sociological factors, while some authors prefer a correlative explanation that underscores deep societal relations as crucial (Ping Huang et al., 2021). Some authors concluded that Confucianism and modernization were incompatible with reform, while others attributed failure to China's integration into the global economy and bureaucratic coordination.

Professor Lei Yi criticizes Dowager Cixi for using the reform movement for her political aims, attempting to balance between conservatives and Westernizers. Professor Ma Yong references Sun Yat-sen, who famously blamed the entire Qing government for focusing solely on self-preservation, with political, economic, and cultural reform not aligned with the self-strengthening movement (Channel, 2022). Despite the extensive material on this topic, no one has deeply compared the coherence of elites with the characteristics and strategies of the two leaders.

METHODOLOGY

It is suggested that case selection represents a challenging task. Gerring and Seawright tried to narrow the definition of a case study by offering a set of criteria for case selection. Moreover, they attempted to find causal effects rather than having minimal generalization of cases (Jason Seawright, 2008). This paper applies the same logic. China experienced five waves of modernization (Soo, 1989). This paper will address the first and second waves for several reasons. Firstly, comparing different modernization periods involves a lengthy study of the elites, which would go beyond the scope of this paper, respecting the length and aims of the manuscript. Furthermore, comparing other cases leads to a contextual analysis problem, as each took place during different historical and geopolitical periods. Finally, if classical elite theory is valid in this case, further comparison of other cases can be addressed in future studies.

To test the theory, it is vital to ask what the main assumptions are. For classical elite theory, there are six assumptions, which are displayed below, with a brief explanation of what we should expect while analyzing selected cases.

1. Every elite is trying to conserve power and privilege. We should expect strong resistance toward reform. This paper will try to identify the national elites who resisted change for several reasons. Firstly, the benefits of political power are substantial. Elites had to utilize the privileges the system offered them. Secondly, the new system would not guarantee their security, as people, like states, also seek security.
2. Elites use tools such as force and fraud, sometimes not explicit. We must identify the use of brutal force to block reform and cultural and linguistic symbols that uphold the system. As Foucault put it, "Power creates knowledge, and knowledge creates power" (Foucault, 2024) Additionally, we must acknowledge the palace intrigues and machinations used against reformers.
3. Religion or ideology plays a vital role in sustaining social structure. We must emphasize the role of Confucianism. Ideology likely played a crucial role in guaranteeing elite rule. If validated, the paper would align with the Marxist view that the ruling class exploited the majority under such governance. (Bryan S. et al., 2016) Thus, we should expect the feudal system, under a coherent ideology—in this case, Confucianism—to guarantee the ruling class's power base.
4. Elite rule reveals two tendencies. If the elite rule is aristocratic, it prevents others from joining their class. If it has a democratic character, there are either ways to enter the ranks

from below or deliberate limitations on entry. In this case, we should expect the Qing system to reflect one of these characteristics, aiming either to absorb new cadres or limit access.

5. History is replete with regime changes, showing that some social structures persist longer but are unstable as democratic tendencies emerge. Under the Qing dynasty, we should expect the political system—characterized as outdated and stagnant—to be undermined by new ideological changes. Whether this was driven by domestic or foreign influence will be explored further.
6. Social revolutions and elite circulation occur when aristocratic tendencies dominate. Pareto emphasized that elites can be replaced through social restructuring. When the system degenerates, we should expect counter-elites to emerge. (Przeworski, 1991) Testing this assumption is straightforward, as the 1911 revolution brought about regime change in China, involving a new social structure. This paper aims to identify counter-elite goals, as we should expect an extensive political program introducing a new social system (Burnham, *The Machiavellians*, 1943).

Several hypotheses were formulated based on classical elite theory and primary and sub-research questions.

- Hypothesis 1: Strong evidence suggests the active participation of national elites as key enablers or blockers of reform.
- Hypothesis 2: Leaders' motivation can be derived from their strategies. The desire to preserve power inclines them towards conservatism.

Following these hypotheses and research design, this paper continues with the conceptualization of elites.

WHO ARE ELITES?

Derived from the Latin *eligere* and French *élite* ("to choose"), elites refer to a distinguished class. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, elites are "those people or organizations that are considered the best or most powerful compared to others of a similar type." (Dictionary.cambridge.org, ๓. ๘.). This paper adopts the following definition: also be defined by their strategic locations in large or otherwise pivotal organizations and movements, and can affect political outcomes regularly and substantially" (Higley, 2009). Specifically, this paper emphasizes national elites. According to Burton and Higley, national elites are "persons who, through their positions in influential organizations and movements, affect national political outcomes regularly and substantially." Research by Higley shows that national elites may comprise only a few people, sometimes barely enough to fill a soccer stadium. This delimitation helps us identify significant players during the late Qing dynasty.

WHY OTHER THEORIES ARE REFUTED

Various theories attempt to explain modernization. Due to scope, only a few will be mentioned. For instance, modernization theory leans toward democratization, positing that a prosperous transition leads civil society to seek greater liberty (Kollmorgen, 2009). However, some liberals expected China to become democratic with the rise of the middle class, yet liberal aspirations faded over time (Haver, 2020). Thus, this theory did not hold, even post-modernization in China after 1978, and cannot explain the failure during the Qing dynasty.

Political modernization theory is also dismissed, as it relies on social mobilization and replacing old political systems—a process lacking in China's case. China was not a colony in the traditional sense, like India. Before the 1911 revolution, China was carved into spheres of influence, as George Kennan put it, with warlords holding sway across various provinces. The international approach would measure how great powers influenced China's domestic decisions. There is little evidence that foreign powers directly influenced the court's decision-making or the Dowager Cixi herself. Although the Qing Empire conceded to foreign demands, foreign

powers did not aim to transform China politically or economically; instead, they sought concessions. Despite influences like the Opium Wars, which may have inspired reformists in the late Qing dynasty, these pressures did not equate to an imposed transformation.

Finally, structural or cultural constraints are insufficient to unravel this complex topic. While early theories linked transformation with democracy and a liberal economy, authors like Barrington Moore and Skocpol offered differing views. Moore examined pathways leading to democracy or autocracy, while Skocpol highlighted the role of elites. However, these ideas, viewed as Neo-Marxian, focused on economic power relations (Bruckner, 2009).

In summary, other theories lack robustness for this test. Since their propositions can be refuted in advance, elite theory was chosen as the analytical tool for this investigation.

SELF-STRENGTHENING MOVEMENT

In 1861, the Xianfeng Emperor died. He had wholeheartedly opposed any reform, so the self-strengthening movement is unsurprisingly associated with the 1860s. More precisely, it is safe to say that after Xianfeng's death, the emperor had, the month before, agreed to open Tsungli Yamen as the office for relations with different countries. He did not intend to permit radical changes; being ill, he simply acknowledged the situation's complexity. Emperor Xianfeng passed away just two months after establishing Tsungli Yamen (Banno, 1964).

His death created an excellent opportunity for Prince Gong and the two dowagers. They ousted the regents and proclaimed the four-year-old emperor on the throne. This development led the two dowagers, Cixi and Ci'an, to rule the country together. Without their assistance, no significant decisions could be made. As a leading figure, Prince Gong enhanced his influence over court politics. He began to promote Han officials, steering China in a new direction (Ven, 2004).

The self-strengthening movement was rooted in Wei Yuan's influential treatise, where he advocated for building shipyards and adopting modern technologies. Consequently, in 1861, a firearm factory was established in Nanjing. Four years later, the factory in Shanghai produced artillery and gunpowder. China took steps towards Westernization, one at a time. Establishing a language school enabled the learning of foreign languages, and students were sent abroad to study in Germany, France, Britain, and America. Surprisingly, Chinese companies began to compete with Western companies and proved profitable. Just a year before the Sino-French war, the China Merchants Steamship Navigation Company's capital net income reached 912,086 silver taels (Verlag, 2014). However, as previously mentioned, foreign instructors were essential for China's military training. The bravery of the Yung-ying army during the Taiping Rebellion created a receptive environment for Western instructors to train the Chinese military and produce some officers. A total of 1,300 men were trained using Western techniques. However, like many initiatives, this was doomed to fail. Some researchers attributed this to Chinese culture, suggesting no class could produce officers, while others blamed anti-Western nationalism and figures like Wo-Jen (Smith, 1976).

Furthermore, some reforms aimed at beyond military matters and proposed political changes. Advocates argued for administrative reforms, with the idea of a parliament gaining traction among some circles. Some even suggested modifying Chinese ceremonies in favor of European etiquette (Eastman, 1968). In this regard, Hunan's experience is worth mentioning. Once a cornerstone of the conservative gentry, changes began with the governorship of Ta-ch'eng and Chen. Initial projects included macadamized roads and electric lights. Ironically, people had opposed establishing telegraph lines a decade prior, but attitudes toward Western technologies have shifted. Working with the gentry, the government initiated business activities, including establishing a mining bureau and match factory. A railway project was proposed to connect Canton to Hankow to improve infrastructure. Prominent gentry figures such as Wang Hsien-ch'ien and Hsiung Hsi-ling pushed for further advancements. Hsien-Chien

even envisioned opening a school to reeducate officials and train them in current affairs—a concept already realized in Japan and oriented towards creating a newly trained bureaucracy.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONSEQUENCES

Some researchers question whether the self-strengthening movement was a failure. The answer might be affirmative if the ultimate goal was to achieve national strength. However, recent historical revisionists argue that self-strengthening saw some success, such as improvements in ship quality and industrial advancements. The primary arguments for its failure include Confucianism's resistance to Western ideas and the high costs of maintaining outdated equipment, which made upgrades challenging. The self-strengthening movement made substantial societal changes, challenging long-standing ideological structures emphasizing obedience and hierarchy. These transformations likely would not have occurred without interaction with Western powers, and it is possible that the Qing dynasty could have ruled longer under safer conditions. Fairbank argues that Japan achieved successful modernization by accepting specific Western ideas, while cultural and ideological factors hindered China (Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing*, 2012). However, analyzing how elites used ideological preferences to serve their interests is essential. Comparing Japan's modernization with China's solely through the lens of success vs. failure overlooks society's complex challenges. Japan became the first Asian power to defeat a Western power, Russia, in 1905. However, Japan's modernization eventually led to militarization and, ultimately, its defeat in World War II, contributing to hubris and militant nationalism. In contrast, China grappled with domestic struggles, warlordism, and civil war.

The self-strengthening movement cannot be considered a complete failure for several reasons. Firstly, it showcased counter-elites' reaction to the empire's new challenges and realities. While they lacked unity or decisive actions, they proposed alternative ways to reform and develop China. Their primary interest was in preserving the Qing dynasty, and they promptly suppressed more radical ideas when necessary, which will be discussed further in the next chapter. The new approach was an intellectual breakthrough, though society required significant time to adapt. Unfortunately, Dowager Cixi was unwilling to pursue reform aggressively due to personal insecurities and political constraints.

Secondly, the self-strengthening movement substantially changed the operational and tactical readiness of the Chinese army. Although numbers were limited, the army units were well-equipped compared to the outdated banner system of the Qing dynasty. A notable example is Yu Shi Kai, later known for associating with a Western-trained army. The shipbuilding sector also saw success, with China producing several quality ships comparable to Japan's. Despite an eventual defeat, better command and tactics might have favored China.

Finally, foreign powers widely supported the self-strengthening movement to maintain the established system in China. They did not support uprisings like the Taiping Rebellion, as the new government could incite anti-foreign sentiment, ultimately leading to the Boxer Rebellion. This support from Britain, Germany, and France facilitated joint ventures and expertise exchanges. The movement effectively countered Japan's ambitions to become a great power and balanced Japan. However, the Chinese leadership's goals often conflicted with Western ambitions, and conservatives, including Dowager Cixi, resisted attempts at rapid reform. In Case 2, we will analyze the Hundred Days of Reform to examine further the theories surrounding classical elite behavior.

100 DAYS REFORM

The political circumstances positioned Emperor Guangxu as the central figure of power. As he matured, his marriage coincided with Dowager Cixi's retirement from active politics. However, although Cixi formally relinquished all responsibilities, she still chose a wife for the emperor.

Remarkably, despite her absence from official duties, Cixi maintained tight control over the emperor. This influence stemmed from several factors: she was the emperor's aunt, with filial piety still a central value, and the emperor was selected according to her will rather than through proper lineage procedures. This irregular succession had a psychological effect, as both lived aware of this fact.

The emperor and members of the Grand Council owed their positions to Cixi, meaning the emperor could not easily dismiss them without a strong justification. Even as he matured, the Grand Council's composition remained unchanged, whereas, in other cases, the council's formation was traditionally altered when an emperor ascended to power (Huang P. , 1985). The Hundred Days of Reform began with the establishment of Peking University. Educational change is always a cornerstone of reform, shaping future generations to adapt quickly to new circumstances. Other edicts called for creating a ministry to oversee agriculture and finances, aiming to generate more capital and establish a new economic reality. Naturally, the military was a priority, with Western technologies seen as the fastest path to modernization through Western training. For instance, Yuan Shi Kai's army was thoroughly Western-trained and equipped, and he would later play one of the most prominent roles in Chinese history.

In essence, the reforms intended to change China's trajectory completely. We can only speculate how modern history might have unfolded without the coup initiated by conservatives who appealed to Dowager Cixi, complaining that the emperor had strayed from tradition and that his new path could be disastrous for the empire. This complaint shows that Cixi's power was more than symbolic; the official risked his life by approaching her in this way, likely believing she had the authority to depose the emperor. Given that a similar precedent existed, the official's reasoning may have been based on this possibility. The conspirators acted swiftly, understanding the stakes were life and death.

It is worth noting that Yuan Shi Kai could have helped the emperor by aligning with him, but despite the emperor's pleas, he chose not to. His calculation was based on the balance of power, and he assessed that Cixi's influence was more substantial. This reasoning aligns with his later decision to abstain from conflict and remain neutral when the Eight-Nation Alliance intervened to defeat the Boxers and captured the capital. As the emperor and his allies lost all hope, the imperial palace was attacked, and the emperor was placed under house arrest. Cixi proclaimed her return to leadership, the six reformers were publicly executed, all reforms were halted, and the conservative status quo was restored under her command (Griffis, 1916).

The reforms stalled by conservatives and Dowager Cixi did not bring peace to the country. Five years later, another rebellion erupted; fortunately for the government, it targeted foreigners instead. The Boxer Rebellion, recently supported by the government, aimed to expel foreigners from China, but it failed due to the alliance of the great powers. Cixi, too, was forced to flee from the capital, but foreign leaders later allowed her to return and rule. Following the Boxer Rebellion, Dowager Cixi was determined to act differently, albeit with the careful consideration of elite opinions. As before, reforms began with education. The state exams, which upheld and catalyzed the Chinese imperial system, lacked logical reasoning, focusing more on rote memory and writing skills than analytical abilities. Thus, the old requirement of memorizing and paraphrasing the Four Books and Five Classics was replaced by a new emphasis on writing essays on Chinese history, including interactions with the West (Ichiko, 1980).

Furthermore, students who had previously been sent abroad were encouraged to return with the promise of official positions. Lastly, Western-style schools were established, with the shortage of qualified personnel addressed by encouraging students to study abroad, particularly in Japan, chosen for its affordability. The Ministry of Education took responsibility for education from the Board of Rites, symbolizing a break from the past. Educational reform was largely successful: within five years, the number of schools increased tenfold to around 52,000,

with an enrollment of one and a half million students. This response indicated that parents held a positive view of the reforms, believing in the promising futures these schools could offer their children.

Military reform coincided with educational reform. New units based on Western training were established, and students were encouraged to pursue military education, primarily in Japan. Domestically, military academies were also established. The final aspect of reform was the consideration of a constitutional regime. This was driven by two factors: externally, Japan's defeat of Russia was seen as a victory of constitutionalism over autocracy. Even in Russia, a revolutionary movement began, though it failed to overthrow the government, which responded with concessions. In China, generals of the new armies also expressed sympathies for constitutionalism. Consequently, five ministers were sent abroad to observe and study foreign governments. Their recommendation was straightforward: reform towards constitutionalism. Despite some opposition, an edict proposed that the Qing dynasty should prepare for this new course. In addition to constitutional reforms, a police force and a Ministry of Finance were established, symbolizing a direct link between the emperor and national wealth, embodying the idea of a "wealthy nation, strong country" (Thompson, 2003).

In summary, Dowager Cixi began preparing the country for a new stage, initially planning to announce the constitution by 1916, with free elections the following year. However, it was decided to expedite the process, with the constitution set to be declared in 1912. Nevertheless, unfolding events revealed that the populace had grown weary of the Qing's ineffective rule. A revolution erupted the year before the expected constitutional declaration, ultimately overthrowing the long-standing dynasty. Dowager Cixi died the day after the death of the Guangxu Emperor, leaving the country uncertain about its future.

In retrospect, her political career was consistently driven by a desire to gain and maintain power by any means necessary. This account highlights her obsession with power and security. When faced with threats, as during the Hundred Days of Reform, she acted swiftly to reclaim what she considered rightfully hers. Although she initially allied with conservatives under the guise of national interest, she found no reason to retain their support when counter-elites grew more potent in the latter half of the 1900s.

TESTING THEORY

The identification of conservative groups (see Table 1) is accelerated by identifying individuals who openly resisted reform and formed distinct factions. Both cases confirm that these groups consistently threatened the imperial throne, regardless of the ruler's intentions. Interestingly, in Chinese history, these factions did not emerge as a military group akin to the Praetorians, who protected the emperor's physical security, or the Janissaries, who directly opposed reform in the Ottoman Empire as a conservative force (Kadercan, 2014). Due to the unique political configuration of the Chinese system, the bureaucracy did not have complete control over the military. The banner system, established by the Qing, remained the primary power base, yet independent units, increasingly equipped with Western weapons and training, were also gaining influence. Yuan Shikai's army is one such example.

One can only speculate how the palace coup might have unfolded if Yuan had decided to defend Guangxu. However, he acted according to his interests, as did many Chinese political elites. They knew from Chinese history that if a dynasty changed, new people would replace existing ministers, secretaries, and officials. In this context, the personal threat was twofold. Firstly, recent reforms suggested a systemic transformation on multiple levels. Adopting Western education would inevitably influence future generations, who would likely oppose preserving the current system.

Table 1 CONSERVATIVE PARTY

Conservative purists led by
Li-Hung-tsao
Chang P'ei-lun
Teng Ch'eng-hsiu
Ch'en Pao-ch'en
Huahis'i-fang
W u Ta-ch'eng
Sheng-yu
Liu En-fu
Li Tz'u-ming

Source: Compiled by Author

On the other hand, within the military, the new changes would render the strategies and tactics used by most Manchu generals obsolete, leaving their positions vacant. Secondly, as the Manchu were always afraid of Han revenge, they ruled them under harsh segregation. Reforms could empower the Han and allow them to strike back for political power. Therefore, due to political and physical insecurity or simply psychological factors, individuals assembled as a faction against reformers, and eventually, they prevailed.

Considering the reasons mentioned above, it is unsurprising that conservatives of the Qing dynasty, in an attempt to preserve personal privileges and power, doubted their ability to adapt to new realities if reforms were implemented. There are many precedents, particularly after the Soviet Union's demise, where elites began cooperating with counter-elites and, in some cases, even formed new governments (Juan Linz, 1996). This was not the case with Qing conservatives, as their mindset differed. Faced with daunting realities, such as numerous battlefield humiliations, they did not support modernization through Western training and weaponry and showed reluctance to adapt to new realities. Either cultural superiority or fear of reform can explain their motivations.

In summary, elites are attached to the power and system they impose on specific societies. The Manchurians invaded China and leveraged the existing ideological system of Confucianism. They wisely refrained from altering the entire legacy of the Ming dynasty but enforced strict segregation between themselves and the Han population. Even if reform had gradually taken shape, some generals would have likely opposed it violently, or certain provinces might have rebelled. Had the Hundred Days' Reform proceeded smoothly, the outcome might have differed. In Chinese dynastic history, one of the main issues was establishing centralized power in every province. Lack of unity and centralization served the elites' purpose, as reforms did not encompass all provinces. Thus, conservatives sought to extend their privileged status for decades.

ELITES USE TOOLS SUCH AS FORCE AND FRAUD, SOMETIMES NOT EXPLICIT

Different elites suppress new ideas or movements through various means. For instance, the Catholic Church did not refrain from setting pyres for heretics. King Philip IV of France avoided official procedures and sentenced Jacques de Molay to public execution by burning him alive (Selwood, 2014). Jana Joan of Arc is another example. Alternatively, consider how the Tokugawa government in Japan mistreated missionaries, forcing them to spit on or walk

over icons (Hagemann, 1942). There are many such examples. With the advent of propaganda, elites combined force with a new level of deception. In Nazi Germany, most Germans began to believe that Jews were the source of social and economic problems and that their deportation or extermination was necessary. Similarly, Jews were expelled from France and Spain on false accusations. These examples demonstrate that elites possess an arsenal of tactics to suppress counter-elites or individuals who challenge the existing system.

Martin Luther exemplifies this; the Catholic Church attempted to excommunicate him and sought his confession. When softer methods fail, elites resort to harsher tactics. In the Qing's case, we see how symbolic power was used. For example, fewer candidates applied when the head of the Grand Council criticized the exams. This demonstrates the power of symbolic authority. Another method of opposing reform was the bureaucratic system, which prevented lower-level pleas from reaching the Grand Council. Kang could only send his memorandums to the emperor with the help of two senior ministers. For others, the door to the Forbidden City was closed permanently.

Additionally, the conservatives constantly opposed the empire's budgetary policy, hindering financing for reformers. The lack of funds was one of the main reasons the Self-Strengthening Movement failed. Empress Dowager Cixi's expenditures, such as her summer palace, have been cited as reasons for the lack of funds that could have supported projects like the Shanghai shipyard or military training. However, the political climate did not allow for Cixi's opposition. Even in retirement, her opponents feared and respected her influence. For example, Prince Chun's diary reveals that he could not make proper eye contact with her. Her defenders acknowledge her trickery, but she employs brutal methods to eliminate opponents.

Finally, the Guangxu Reformation serves as an open example: when elites sensed it was now or never, they acted, initiating a palace coup. The public execution of the six reformers served as a warning to others that challenging the established system would lead to the same fate.

RELIGION OR IDEOLOGY PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN SUSTAINING SOCIAL STRUCTURE

While religion did not play a significant role in China as in Europe, the Arabian Peninsula, or the Middle East, the Chinese empire can be seen as a Confucian-legalist state, where Confucianism provided ideological justification for imperial rule. Much like Christianity provided the divine rationale for European monarchs, legalism was a powerful tool for preserving power by force. Some researchers cite Confucianism as a primary obstacle to reform. This is true, as conservatives used Confucian arguments against reform (Zhao, 2015). While the third assumption of elite theory may appear straightforward, the reform enablers and blockers in this case were national elites. A challenging question might be, why did Confucian arguments not prevail when Dowager Cixi initiated reforms in the late 19th century? Acts like establishing a parliament were considered. Thus, elite theory aligns with Marxism in recognizing religion or ideology as sustaining societal structure, (Marx, 1844) although their perspectives on change and historical progression differ.

Confucianism also influenced the decision to wage war against the British in the First Opium War, with cultural superiority blinding the emperor. Confucianism was used by the Qing dynasty to justify their rule, claiming to restore harmony. Harmony held deep political meaning in Chinese society, stemming from the belief that obedience to one's seniors was essential for harmony. As Confucius said, "Let the ruler be a ruler; the minister, a minister; the father, a father; the son, a son" (Waley, 1989). This system was ideal for Chinese imperial elites, who did not acknowledge a solid religious foundation within Chinese society. Although religious rebellions like the Taiping and Muslim uprisings occasionally challenged this, the central

government prevailed. Finally, filial piety even deterred Emperor Guangxu from implementing reforms as he hesitated to remove the most significant threat, his aunt, Dowager Cixi.

ELITE RULE REVEALS TWO TENDENCIES. IF ONE IS ARISTOCRATIC, IT MEANS THAT THE RULING CLASS PREVENTS OTHERS FROM JOINING THEIR RANKS

In Europe, maintaining counter-elites required an aristocratic system, which was eventually overturned. Marx identified three phases of political-economic orders, which can be applied to humanity's general history. Initially, the difference between the Chinese and European models is evident. Shortly after Europe transformed into a capitalist economy, China remained feudal. This divergence may be explained by social structure. Traders, viewed differently in Chinese and Western societies, were downgraded in the former due to Confucian culture, while they became essential in the latter. By creating capitalist societies with wealth and monopolies, Western traders established a social gap that marginalized people experiencing poverty, which remains a global issue today.

According to classical elite theory's fourth assumption, Confucianism heavily influenced Chinese political history and society. Confucianism contributed to a scholar-based bureaucracy, where social mobility was possible through state exams held every three years. Lower-class families had the hope that a successful exam performance could change their fortunes. In the final stage, candidates were interviewed by the emperor, the highest authority. However, the Qing dynasty maintained the examination system while enforcing strict segregation, with high positions reserved exclusively for the Manchu. Thus, the political system established by the Manchu revealed an aristocratic nature, with elites preserving their rule accordingly.

Regarding reform, it cannot be said that Han individuals sought to overthrow the Manchu. Instead, reformers' primary motivation was to save the country from future disasters. Ironically, the conservatives, who opposed reform to maintain their rule, could not foresee any alternative. Their aristocratic character left them too attached to the existing structure.

HISTORY IS REplete WITH REGIME CHANGES, INDICATING THAT SOME SOCIAL STRUCTURES PERSIST LONGER BUT ARE NOT STABLE AS DEMOCRATIC TENDENCIES EMERGE

Chinese history after unification is a history of dynasties, which lasted until the 1911 revolution. Dynasties changed, but the political system remained bare primarily. The reformation ideas that emerged sometimes introducing new political agendas, were developed in the second half of the 19th century. It is essential to ask if external factors triggered these changes. At first glance, before the Opium War, China chose to isolate itself, restrict people from leaving the country, and limit trade to the port of Guangzhou. The Sino-centric worldview, as Fairbank argues, created an internal sense of cultural superiority (Basu, 2014). Thus, it is unsurprising that Macartney's mission failed because China believed it needed nothing from foreigners.

Industrialization and capitalism spurred European empires to seek new territories and markets. To Europeans, China was a vast land with a considerable army. Controlling such territory and combating insurgents seemed challenging. Moreover, European states were embroiled in the pre-and post-Napoleonic eras, requiring time to recover and maintain what was known as the Concert of Europe. In 1839, the British challenged the Chinese in open conflict. Even though China lost that war and signed a humiliating treaty, the Self-Strengthening Movement gained momentum in 1860. External factors can be seen as a significant trigger. The response to the outdated system of the Qing dynasty can be viewed

through the lens of the Taiping Rebellion, which had unique characteristics. Although the rebellion was crushed, the international situation remained concerning for China. Before securing complete victory, China lost the Second Opium War and signed yet another humiliating treaty.

Additionally, Japan learned valuable lessons from Western technological dominance, leading to the Meiji Restoration and its subsequent flexing of military power over Korea, a region within China's sphere of influence. The war with France for control over Indochina and the acquisition of territories by imperial powers such as Germany and Russia culminated in another psychological blow: defeat by Japan in 1895. These events created a catastrophic situation that demanded urgent reform. Such external pressures affected the mindset of reformers, spurring them to action. The Guangxu Reforms were aimed at addressing domestic issues to meet foreign challenges. One could argue that the success of reforms depended on elites, as the unfamiliar situation influenced the perspectives of enablers and blockers alike. Simply put, it was foreigners, considered barbarians, who destabilized the Sino-centric Chinese world, prompting the counter-elite to view their technologies and knowledge as essential for survival.

SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS AND ELITE CIRCULATION ARE EXPECTED WHEN THE ARISTOCRATIC TENDENCY DOMINATES

The last assumption can serve as a continuation of the previous analysis. The Qing struggled to consolidate power, and throughout any dynasty, there were numerous rebellions. Elite circulation primarily occurred when a new emperor was chosen, as he sought to bring his supporters to the Grand Council, a common practice throughout history. It likely indicated that the emperor's power was limited if this did not happen. As we concluded, the aristocratic tendency was predominant during the Qing dynasty. Counter-elites, too, displayed particular tendencies. Initially, they focused on educational and military reforms. For instance, when the Self-Strengthening Movement began, its primary focus was on military development, particularly building a robust navy and implementing Western military training.

Furthermore, the Hundred Days' Reform announcement began with educational changes. There was, however, always a divergence of ideas among counter-elites. For instance, while Prince Cheng and his faction were moderates, Kang and his followers favored extreme measures. This radical approach partially contributed to Hunan's failure. As observed, reforms stalled when the more radical ideas were introduced.

Several decades later, another country experienced a similar story where radicals triumphed over moderates. However, Lenin and his comrades resorted to brutal force against all opposition, including the White Army and Mensheviks. In China, however, extremists lacked a favorable environment and sufficient force to bolster their ideas.

In summary, counter-elites also had extensive political agendas, but due to a lack of coherence, unity, and other factors, they could not succeed. Thus, classical elite theory's assumption could accurately predict whether social revolutions were successful and establish general trends for success and failure.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, the paper examined the means of Qing rule, suggesting that elite theory can be applied to describe how the Qing ruled through the geopolitical upheaval of the late 19th century. For instance, elites used the ideological foundation of the Chinese Empire to assimilate Confucianism and maintain bureaucratic control. Classical elite theory also distinguishes between governing and counter-elites by introducing the notion of circulation, with Pareto viewing history as a cycle of elite circulation.

Conversely, classical elite theory reveals several shortcomings in explaining why reformation failed. Firstly, the founders of classical elite theory fail to address the role and characteristics of leaders and their relationships with either elites or counter-elites. This is significant, as it allows us to differentiate not only the motivations and strategies of leaders but also the defining role of their character in determining the success or failure of reform. We must also consider the pressure exerted by both groups and the restrictive ruling environment. In our case, two noteworthy features emerged: Dowager Cixi could not exercise absolute power simply because she was a woman. Interestingly, she alternated between conservative and counter-elite factions. Meanwhile, the emperor's bold move in 1895 suggests he eventually sought to sever ties with conservatives, which shaped his relationship with Dowager Cixi. Character, notably, plays a crucial role. The indecisiveness of Louis XVI cost him his life and contributed to the French Revolution.

Finally, it is essential to emphasize the pressures that generate the stability of elites. In China's case, we can identify two. For example, the Opium Wars, representing international pressure, considerably destabilized the Sino-centric worldview, as Fairbank terms it. The military defeats led Chinese scholars to advocate for the modernization of the army. The Sea Treaty is a prime example of an author urging the establishment of a powerful navy against foreign threats. Secondly, domestic upheavals, most notably the Taiping Rebellion, further drained the court's treasury, exacerbating the empire's financial constraints. The Opium Wars had already influenced public opinion, and the Manchu needed to accommodate this new reality.

Following this narrative, could we conclude that leaders remain in power by aligning with conservatives? Two cases reveal that leaders adopted different strategies. Psychologically, every leader desires to maintain control as long as possible. While Dowager Cixi aligned with conservatives and staged a coup d'état, Emperor Guangxu relied on counter-elites for reform. Did he have another option? One could argue that he needed a radical change to exercise actual power. Whether he swiftly arrested the conservative wing or gradually removed them, the effectiveness of either strategy remains debatable. As observed, Dowager Cixi was cautious, playing a long, strategic game with her opponents. Sometimes, her revenge took years, as in the case of Prince Cheng.

Thus, radical reforms could only proceed when the counter-elite held proportional power over the conservatives. This also depends on the leader's characteristics. The two cases examined involve different leaders, and Dowager Cixi, as a woman, naturally faced more restrictions, limiting her influence compared to men. Table 2 shows that Emperor Guangxu later sought to extend reforms beyond education and the military, encountering fierce opposition. While Cixi's parliament announcement did not meet intense resistance from elites, it underscores that a leader requires substantial elite support and, without reforms, is doomed. Furthermore, radical ideas require significant time to introduce and implement; they cannot be achieved overnight.

Table 2: LEADERS' STRATEGIES DURING THE REFORMATION ATTEMPT

Leaders	Counter elites	Conservatives	The overall outcome of reforms
Dowager Cixi	Opposing	Aligning	Success
Emperor Guangxu	Aligning	Opposing	Failure

Source: Compiled by author

Finally, based on my observations, this paper has two suggestions for classical elite theory. First, we should consider the leader's characteristics; while their chosen strategies depend on their aims, their actions reveal more about their character. The relationships between leaders and elites or counter-elites are also crucial when studying the reformation process. Essentially, leaders' choices are decisive in determining the overall outcome's success.

Secondly, classical elite theory can expand beyond general assumptions to a more dynamic research agenda, analyzing as many cases as possible. Using the interaction between leaders and elites as a critical variable, we could better understand the causal mechanisms of interaction and success. There is ample historical evidence that can be analyzed through the framework of classical elite theory, which makes the theory still relevant.

CONCLUSION

The paper used the comparative case study model to test the assumptions of classical elite theory. Analyzing the Chinese reformation attempt during the Qing dynasty revealed the limited scope of actions available to the leaders. For instance, while Dowager Cixi was regarded as a ruler behind the scenes, she had to consider her gender, as she could not directly challenge the emperor's ideas. Emperor Guangxu himself could not exercise actual power due to the political circumstances created by the dowager. When he tried, he underestimated the conservatives' influence.

The paper emphasizes the logic of classical elite theory, which posits that a small portion of people make, block, or execute critical decisions. Furthermore, the paper suggests that the relationship between elites and leaders should be examined more closely. Additional datasets could clarify the success rate of initiated reforms.

Finally, the paper demonstrates that the assumptions of classical elite theory hold. Some assumptions may seem straightforward, such as the psychological drive to preserve power; however, a deep dive into historical events provides more concrete details about how individuals acted in specific situations. As the paper's assumptions suggest, both cases reveal radically different approaches to regaining power. While Guangxu aligned with reform-minded individuals, or "counter-elites," Cixi opposed them with a conservative faction. A decade later, she began guiding China toward Westernization, but significant resistance was absent. This situation suggests that the relationship between elites and counter-elites was well-balanced. If we attempt to generalize such actions, several challenges arise. Firstly, no two situations are identical when considering the geopolitical context, individual characteristics, and the composition of elites and counter-elites.

Moreover, classical elite theory remains relevant and can be applied to historical parallels. As states persist, there may be further reformation attempts. The Chinese reformation attempt can be considered a failure, but comparing it to other cases would be interesting, especially with a focus on leader and elite-counter-elite relations. Regarding counterfactuals, had the reforms succeeded, European armies might still have defeated the Chinese military, but that is not how events unfolded. As battles demonstrated, the Chinese showed bravery, daring to attack with only pikes and swords against muskets; proper training and equipment could have altered the battlefield outcomes. While Europeans might still have held an advantage over the Qing's army, the same could not be said against the Japanese, who often struggled with logistics due to their geographical location. Proper tactics and command could have averted the Treaty of Shimonoseki and further humiliation.

On the other hand, reformation carried inherent risks, which conservatives feared. Firstly, it could have overthrown Qing imperial rule, as some reformers, like Kang, had extensive and radical political agendas. Radicalism, which caused division, as seen in Hunan's experience, highlighted a lack of coherence among counter-elites. Lastly, if unsupported by intense political

and military power, conservatives could always suppress reforms, as occurred during the Hundred Days of Reform.

Ultimately, leaders' decisions matter. This paper highlights two intertwined cases where personal ambitions and power struggles led political leaders to clash with different elites. Research shows that national elites are a minority who either hold power or push a new course for the country. While this led to calamities in Japan as the government became militarized in the 1930s, a similar outcome could have occurred in China. Even after the Xinhai Revolution, the country descended into a field of military warlords and civil war, culminating in a communist victory.

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