1898: 103 Days, Hundreds of Edicts — Why Did Only One University Survive?

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1898. Beijing. A group of scholars tried
to remake an empire that had run
for more than two hundred years
one imperial edict at a time.
They had a young emperor behind them,
and a great deal of paper.
One hundred and three days later,
it was all undone.
This episode does not go back over
what happened before. It stays inside those
hundred and three days: what they actually
did, and why they lost.
The man who led them was called
Kang Youwei. The war with Japan had
been lost, Taiwan ceded, and two hundred
million taels of silver paid in indemnity
we have covered that in earlier episodes.
One line is enough here: this reform
was not conjured from nothing.
It was forced by defeat.
Kang passed the provincial exams only after
several attempts, and took the highest degree
at thirty-six. His books are, academically,

contested. Scholars Liao Ping and Qian Mu
have argued that his reading of the
New Text classics forced the evidence
he liked to cast Confucius as a
precursor of institutional reform, to give reform
a theoretical root. That is an academic
judgment, and it is a separate matter
from the role he played in 1898.
One thing, though, is not disputed:
he could move a room, and he
had nerve. A man who failed the
examinations repeatedly, then rewrote the meaning of
the sage's texts to suit a programme,
had a certain audacity.
In 1895 he drafted a ten-thousand-word memorial overnight
and gathered examination candidates to petition against
the peace and for reform.
It came to be called the " Gongche
Shangshu" memorial. To be precise: that memorial
never actually reached Guangxu.
It circulated among the literati and became
a gesture. Checking the attendance register,
Mao Haijian (A Textual Study of the
Events of the 1898 Reform) puts the
actual number of signatories at around eighty.
Both accounts stand; neither is privileged here.
In June 1898, Guangxu received Kang Youwei in

audience. The emperor was twenty-seven; he had
reigned twenty-four years, but real power had
remained with Cixi all along — we have
covered that, so it gets one clause
here. After the audience, Kang did not
get into the Grand Council.
The Manchu grandees would not have it.
What he did get was a privilege:
the right to memorialise directly, bypassing the
ministries and reaching the emperor himself.
That was the opening.
From then on, reform edicts could bypass
the regular bureaucratic ladder and come straight
from the emperor's brush.
On 11 June, Guangxu issued the edict " Mingding
Guoshi" — establishing the national policy.
The reform had formally begun.
From that day, over the hundred and
three days, the court issued well over
a hundred edicts: abolish the eight-legged essay,
open schools, train a new army,
set up bureaus of agriculture, industry and
commerce, allow commoners to publish newspapers.
It was the first time in two
thousand years that anyone had tried to
refit the whole system at the institutional
level. But the more edicts there were,

the clearer the problem became.
An edict is not the same thing
as power. Those below could decline to
carry it out, could delay, could comply
in form and not in substance.
The provincial governors-general of the day
men like Zhang Zhidong and Liu Kunyi
mostly watched and waited.
Edicts flew out of Beijing; the provinces
stayed quiet. This was what many at
the time had not thought through:
an order on paper only becomes real
when someone carries it and pushes it.
Yet only days before Kang's audience,
Cixi had already issued three decrees of
her own. First: dismiss Weng Tonghe,
the emperor's tutor. Second: officials of the
second rank and above must present themselves
at the Summer Palace to thank the
empress dowager for their appointments.
Third: Ronglu becomes governor-general of Zhili,
commanding the Beiyang forces.
On their face these were routine arrangements.
In substance they returned the power of
appointment — and the troops — firmly to Cixi's
hands. The decisive point of a reform
was never how fine the edicts read.

It was who could appoint whom,
and who held the soldiers.
On that, Guangxu's side had already lost
ground.
Kang went further. He proposed a Bureau
of Institutions, with twelve specialised sub-bureaus beneath
it, which would bypass the Six Ministries
and draft regulations and drive the new
policies directly for the emperor.
To Kang this was efficiency.
To the entire court it was the
dismantling of a ministerial system that had
stood for centuries. The Six Ministries,
the Grand Council, the governors-general — all of
them were the ones being routed around.
So the opposition was not simply conservatism.
It was material interest.
The bureau was never established.
But the mere proposal had already turned
the whole officialdom against them.
Of the hundred and three days,
exactly one thing survived: the Imperial University.
On 3 July 1898 its charter was approved.
Sun Jianai became its first director of
studies; W. A. P.
Martin served as head instructor in Western
learning. Its site was the Hejia Princess

Mansion on Jingshan East Street — the area of today's
55 Shatan Houjie in Beijing's Dongcheng District.
The charter drafted by Liang Qichao called
it "the model for the schools of
all the provinces. " After the coup,
every other decree was annulled.
This school alone was kept.
It became the predecessor of Peking University.
Walk down Shatan Houjie today and those
old buildings are still standing, with a
heritage plaque marking the site associated with
Peking University's Red Building.
It is the one reform of 1898
still alive.
To see who was alienated, look at
where power actually lay.
The Manchu grandees were the first group
made uncomfortable. Abolishing sinecure offices, drawing in
military authority, requiring bannermen to earn their
own living — every cut pointed at their
livelihood. Ronglu was the key figure among
them. He held the Beiyang troops,
and he had Cixi's confidence.
The reformers wanted to go around him;
they could not go around the guns
he held. Then there were the unbending
conservatives — men like Gangyi and Xu Tong

who simply despised these "wild scholars" and
held that the ancestors' institutions could not
be changed. These people did not have
to end up on the other side.
It is a pity that the reformers'
manner left them no way down.
Start with the cut of offices.
What was cut was not only bureaus,
but the people inside them.
Remove one official and behind him stands
a household, disciples, old associates.
These people were not necessarily enemies.
They could have been won over,
placated, absorbed slowly. Reform in most dynasties
settled the old guard first and pushed
the new measures afterwards.
The reformers chose the fastest route:
one clean cut. Before they had worked
out where these people would go,
they had already taken away their posts.
The officials who were cut went straight
to the Summer Palace to complain.
And so the opposition was delivered to
the other side by the reformers' own
hands.
Then there is Kang Youwei himself,
and how he appeared at court.

Weng Tonghe's diary records that Kang was "exceedingly wild" in company — he left no room in argument, and even Weng, the emperor's own tutor, was talked back to. He gave little thought to tactics. Grand Council members such as Sun Jianai and Ronglu were men who could have been managed; he made enemies of them without need. It is recorded that he even told Guangxu: do not abolish the old offices, only add new appointments. The words were right. The manner pushed people away. A man who wanted to do great things turned everyone who could have helped into people on the other side. That is not a story about the enemy being too strong; it is about being too hurried. Too hurried to remember that whether a reform succeeds often depends less on how right your thinking is than on how many people you can hold together.

Money. Reform needed schools, a new army, new enterprises. Every one of them burned silver. Qing annual revenue in these years is estimated by scholars at roughly eighty-three

to eighty-nine million taels of silver:
land-poll tax over twenty million, salt tax
over ten million, likin internal transit dues
over ten million, and maritime customs seventeen
to twenty-three million. (Source: scholarly estimates such
as Peng Yuxin, A Fiscal History of
the Qing.)But after 1895 the Qing was
already carrying heavy foreign debt.
Between 1894 and 1898, new foreign borrowing for indemnities and
loans accumulated to roughly three hundred and
fifty million taels. (Source: compilations of Qing
fiscal materials.)By 1899, servicing that debt
principal and interest — took close to thirty
percent of government revenue.
Guangxu also tried to raise money from
the public. In 1898 the government issued a
public bond of one hundred million taels.
It sold about one million before the
issue was halted. Credit is also a
resource of reform. When a bond will
not sell, it means the court's capacity
to borrow from its own people is
gone.
The reformers did not live in the
palace. Most of them lived in the
guild-hall quarter outside Xuanwu Gate.
Kang Youwei lived at the Nanhai guild

hall, on Mishi Hutong; Tan Sitong at
the Liuyang guild hall, on Beibanjie Hutong;
Liang Qichao at the Xinhui guild hall,
on Fenliuli Street. A few alleys apart,
within walking distance. Argument, drafting, night visits
all of it happened under these lamps.
Nearby were the Guangheju restaurant, the Heniantang
pharmacy, the courtyards of Fayuan Temple:
where they ate, bought medicine, and walked
off their moods. Most of these guild
halls no longer stand, or have become
private housing. At the Liuyang guild hall
site on Beibanjie Hutong a heritage plaque
still stands, marking that Tan Sitong once
lived here.
The reformers held edicts.
The other side held something else
troops, authority, and decades of accumulated weight.
Where was the opening?
Guangxu grew desperate, and sent a secret
edict to Kang Youwei and Tan Sitong:
the situation is critical, find a way,
quickly. Tan Sitong thought of a desperate
move: go to Yuan Shikai.
We have covered Yuan — the troops he
trained at Xiaozhan were the most presentable
modern force of the day.

One night Tan went to see Yuan
and asked him to bring his troops
up, surround the Summer Palace, and protect
the emperor. What passed that night,
no one can fully reconstruct.
The surviving accounts do not agree:
Yuan's own diary reads one way,
Liang Qichao's account another.
The version that spread widest is this:
Yuan went straight to Ronglu and informed,
and that triggered the coup.
Treating that as settled fact is what
many popular history programmes do.
But scholars have disputed it throughout.
Mao Haijian and other revisionists point out
that Cixi and Ronglu had already been
positioning themselves — Ronglu had already moved Nie
Shicheng's and Dong Fuxiang's troops toward Beijing,
which was not something that happened overnight.
Even if Yuan had done nothing,
that move would probably have gone ahead
anyway.
On 21 September 1898, Cixi resumed the regency and
placed Guangxu under confinement at Yingtai.
The reform, one hundred and three days
long, was over. Tan Sitong, Kang Guangren,
Lin Xu, Yang Shenxiu, Yang Rui and

Liu Guangdi — six men — were executed at
Caishikou. Tan could have left.
He did not. Liang Qichao records that
he was chivalrous by nature, careless with
money and loyal to friends, generous to
the point of extravagance.
When someone urged him to flee before
the end, he left a line:
" Reform in every country has come through
bloodshed; in China none has yet been
heard of who shed blood for reform,
and that is why the nation does
not flourish. " That was not a speech.
It was where his mind was before
he died. Caishikou is where the six
were killed; the Qing execution ground was
here. Go there today and you will
find a metro station, a shopping district,
and the old Heniantang pharmacy sign.
Nothing of the execution ground remains
even the archway that witnessed countless beheadings
has been pulled down.
Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao escaped
one to Japan, the other by a
long route overseas. Kang raised money among
overseas Chinese in the name of "rescuing
the emperor, " and the response was large.

But Feng Ziyou's Reminiscences of the Revolution
and related accounts record that a good
part of these sums went to his
own housing and expenses, and that he
lived rather grandly: a man in exile
keeping a fine house and travelling in
style, set against the stated aim of
saving his sovereign — a jarring contrast.
It should also be said that he
kept publishing newspapers abroad and maintained the
Protect the Emperor Society, carrying the reformist
case to a wider audience.
Back to the question at the start:
why did this reform fail?
The answer is not in the words
"the enemy was too strong. "
It is this: the thinking was right,
the path was rushed; the edicts were
many, the people were not secured;
there were friends available, and they were
pushed into being enemies.
Watching any reform today, the rule has
not changed: first count who is on
our side, and who we have pushed
to the other. Who holds the guns,
who holds the money, who holds the
appointments — those three are more solid than

a hundred edicts.

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