

Essay Question:

(Week 4) Providing key examples. Discuss the reasons why the Qing Dynasty imperial system (1644-1912) was unable to prevent its downfall in 1912?

The Qing imperial system that lasted as long as 268 years in China was eventually overthrown with the roar of gunfire of the 1911-12 Xinhai Revolution. While the direct cause of the downfall of this seemingly unbreakable dynasty being the nationalists' revolutionary challenge is extensively acknowledged, scholars have been debating over the long-term causes of Qing's collapse. For instance, Sun argues that the huge loopholes in the Qing finance and taxation contributed to the downfall of the dynasty.¹ Chen, however, demonstrates that the New Policy and constitutionalism hastened revolution and Qing's downfall.² Similarly, this essay attempts to explore the conflicts and opportunities that had been accumulated for approximately 30 years prior to Qing's downfall, which made the year 1912 so special that the end of an era occurred. In general this essay argues that economic, military, ethnic and ideological causes were responsible for Qing's downfall. Structurally I begin with discussing the economic burden of Qing imposed by both internal and external crisis. Then I move on to the military factor focusing on Yuan Shikai and his Beiyang Army. The ethnic conflict between Manchus and Hans is also present in this essay. The emergence of constitutional republican ideology in China is also emphasized as one of the fundamental causes of the Qing's collapse.

Economic problems in late Qing China contributed to the coming end of this feudal system. Primarily, imperial corruption is exemplified by daily expense of the imperial family. The fact that whenever the imperial family had things custom made, the expenses reported were always much higher than the real costs was an open secret in the government.³ The Guangxu Emperor and Concubine Zhen's imperial nuptials in 1889, too, cost more than 4,000 taels of gold and more than 4,800,000 taels of silver, and was the most expensive imperial wedding in Qing's history.⁴ Another major financial burden of Qing was imposed upon by the Western imperial powers via multiple unequal treaties. For example, the Boxer Protocol signed in 1901 between China and the Eight-Nation Alliance compelled Qing to pay war reparations of \$333 million after looting and burning countless fine art in the Beijing city.⁵ More importantly, China had to pay the reparations in foreign currency, which was a huge penalty as it sustained heavy losses through the exchange rate, which was virtually monopolized by foreign banks.⁶ In order to deal with both the internal luxurious consumption of the royal family and the heavy indemnities forced upon by external

¹ Qing-ling Sun, 'On the Issue of the Title Deed of the Qing Dynasty', *Journal of Fujian Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 06 (2003), 109-115 (p.109).

² Weiqiang Chen, 'A Historical View of the New Policy and Constitutionalism in the Late Qing Dynasty: an Introspection Focusing on Local Autonomy', *Journal of Guizhou University (Social Sciences)*, 30 (2012), 110-123 (p.110).

³ X. L. Woo, *Empress Dowager Cixi: China's Last Dynasty and the Long Reign of a Formidable Concubine: Legends and Lives During the Declining Days of the Qing Dynasty* (New York: Algora, 2002), p.109.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.189.

⁵ Xiaobing Li, *China at War: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), p.26.

⁶ Jae Hyung Kim, 'The Boxer Rebellion: the Main Causes and Consequences', *The Concord Review*, 23 (2013), 69-84(p.77).

intervention, the Qing government had to raise salt prices, the market taxes and lowered salaries.⁷ Subsequently renewed anti-Qing sentiments grew among the Chinese public, as well as further propelling the rise of the revolutionary movements, which directly threatened the existence of Qing as a political entity.

Parallel to the economic cause is the military factor that made the year 1912 potentially possible for the downfall of the Qing dynasty. One must remember that despite conservatism the Qing did struggle to reform and modernize itself, where the advanced New Army was established under the New Policy. For instance, Yuan Shikai provided leadership for a new stage of military reform by forming the Newly Created Army based entirely on Western models with approval of the Qing court.⁸ With the Newly Created Army as its core, the Beiyang Army, under the leadership of Yuan, had become the Qing Dynasty's main military force by 1911.⁹ However, maintenance of the Beiyang Army was only possible because of court support that ensured the allocation of other funds for Yuan's use, whose ability to obtain this financial support was dependent on his influence over Cixi and his facility at court politics.¹⁰ Ironically, when the Qing court recalled Yuan to serve as commander of its military forces as revolt spread throughout south China, Yuan allowed rebels to destroy the imperial garrisons, and accepted the presidency offered by Sun Yatsen.¹¹ In other words, the Qing's active reformist endeavor of modernization did successfully reinforce its military strength, but meanwhile served as an underlying danger that eventually led to the entire collapse of this feudal system being manipulated by Yuan.

Equally importantly is the fact that ethnic division accelerated the downfall of the Qing imperial system. The Qing Dynasty erected by the minority ethnic group, the Manchus, ruled over the majority Hans, and the racial conflicts between Manchus and Hans had never been completely resolved. Notably the Manchu banner people were treated differently as well as better than the Han civilians were. If, for example, a Manchu and a Han were brought before a court on a legal matter, the Han was required to kneel before the magistrate whereas the Manchu was permitted to stand.¹² Such privileges enjoyed by the Manchus led to anti-Manchu sentiments and ethnic division, which had accumulated for centuries and eventually evolved into a crucial component of the newly emerged ethnic nationalist thinking in the late nineteenth century. As Zou Rong complained in his pamphlet *The Revolutionary Army of 1903*,

Unjust! Unjust! What is most unjust and bitter in China today is to have to put up with this inferior race of nomads with wolfish ambitions, these thievish Manchus, as our rulers.¹³

Such anti-Manchu nationalism which further extended to anti-feudalism composed

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Edward A. Mccord, *The Power of the Gun* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.33.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.34.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.36.

¹¹ Warren I. Cohen, *East Asia at the Center* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p.313.

¹² The Manchus also enjoyed privileges in terms of politics, education, recruitment of the civil bureaucracy etc. For details, see Chapter 1 Separate and Unequal. Edward J. M. Rhoads, *Manchus & Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928* (Washington: the University of Washington Press, 2000), p.42.

¹³ Zou Rong, *Gemingjun*, 5 (based on Lust's translation, 65). Cited in Rhoads, *Manchus & Hans*, p.11.

significantly of the ideological bases in Sun Yasten's nationalist revolution. "Expulsion of the Tartar caitiffs", or the principle of nationality was the first of Sun's stated goals.¹⁴ And eventually as mentioned previously, the emperor abdicated enforced by Yuan Shikai in 1912 and the ethnic objective of China's national revolution was fulfilled.

While ethnic nationalism grew, ideological development that a constitutionalist republican China must be founded contributed to Qing's downfall as well. Again as Sun Yatsen asserted in 1905, "After driving out the Tartars we must restore our national state".¹⁵ While republican political views did not originate in China, intellectuals were significantly influenced by the West in various ways. On the one hand, despite the disastrous consequences of China's conflicts with Western powers in that period particularly with the signed unequal treaties, the interaction with or the presence of the West served as ideological enlightenment for China. In 1908 America donated nearly \$12 million to the construction of Qinghua University in Beijing, and in the same year decided to remit most of the money owed from the Boxer indemnity by applying it to scholarships for Chinese students in American universities.¹⁶ On the other hand, during its highly limited modern reform, the court arranged for the payment of the fees of Chinese students at Japanese, American and European universities. By 1899 more than a hundred students had gone to Japan, among which the Youth Society dedicated to nationalism was founded in 1900 and the Constitution-Protection Clubs sprang up; the Qing who initially desired these students to serve the court with Western knowledge ended up trying to control their studies as the students became increasingly rebellious.¹⁷ Therefore, the emergence of Western constitutional republican thinking in China threatened Qing's governance and remained pivotal in Sun Yasten's nationalist revolutionary theory.

To sum up, huge indemnities and its internal corruption highly raised the financial burden of Qing. The great Beiyang Army trained by Yuan under the official assistance of the court eventually turned against it standing along the nationalists. The ethnic privilege enjoyed by Manchus resulted in serious social division with the majority Hans. Chinese students who possessed the knowledge of republican ideology also played a crucial role in challenging Qing's feudal authority. In conclusion, apart from the 1911-12 Xinhai Revolution that immediately overthrew the powerful Qing imperial system, economic, military, ethnic and ideological factors had all destabilized Qing's sovereignty in the long term.

Word count 1585

¹⁴ As Sun's revolution succeeded, the last emperor, Puyi, gave way to the demands to store a government with cabinet, but when the names of the members of the cabinet were eventually announced in 1911, it was discovered that ten of them were Manchus and only six were Imperial Princes. Rhoads, *Manchus & Hans*, p.11.

¹⁵ Christopher Hibbert, *The Dragon Wakes: China and the West, 1793-1911* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p.360.

¹⁶ Kim, 'The Boxer Rebellion: the Main Causes and Consequences', p78. Sanderson Beck, 'Qing Dynasty Fall 1875-1912' (published in *East Asia 1800-1949* in 2013), <<http://www.san.beck.org/21-2-QingFall1875-1912.html>> (accessed on July 9, 2013).

¹⁷ Beck, 'Qing Dynasty Fall 1875-1912'.

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