

Document 7.3: Excerpts describing Emperor Guangxu and his 1898 reforms

The changes in the attitude of the court towards a new educational system began, as do many great undertakings, in a very simple way. We have already shown how the eunuchs secured all kinds of foreign mechanical toys to entertain the baby emperor Guangxu; how these were supplemented in his boyhood by ingenious clocks and watches; how he became interested in the telegraph, the telephone, steam cars, steamboats, electric light and steam heat, and how he had them first brought into the palace and then established throughout the empire: and how he had the phonograph, graphophone, cinematograph, bicycle, and indeed all the useful and unique inventions of modern times brought in for his entertainment.

He then began the study of English. When in 1894 a New Testament was sent to the Empress Dowager on the occasion of her sixtieth birthday, he at once secured from the American Bible Society a copy of the complete Bible for himself. He began studying the Gospel of Luke. This gave him a taste for foreign literature and he sent his eunuchs to the various book depositories and bought every book that had been translated from the European languages into the Chinese. To these he bent all his energies and it soon became noised abroad that the emperor was studying foreign books and was about to embrace the Christian faith. This continued from 1894 till 1898, during which time his example was followed by tens of thousands of young Chinese scholars throughout the empire, and Zhang Zhidong wrote his epoch-making book "China's Only Hope" which, being sent to the young Emperor, led him to enter upon a universal reform, the chief feature of which may be considered the adoption of a new educational system....

[W]hile all the English papers in the port cities were talking of China being divided up amongst the Powers [Great Britain, Germany, Russia, France, Japan]... it was these things that led the emperor to enter upon his work of reform....

The *Peking¹ Gazette* continued to come daily bringing with it the following twenty-seven

¹ Former name for Beijing

decrees in a little more than twice that many days. I will give an epitome of the decrees so that the reader at a glance may see what the emperor undertook to do. Summarized they are as follows:

1. The establishment of a university at Beijing.
2. The sending of imperial clansmen to foreign countries to study the forms and conditions of European and American government.
3. The encouragement of the arts, sciences and modern agriculture.
4. The Emperor expressed himself as willing to hear the objections of the conservatives to progress and reform.
5. Abolished the literary essay as a prominent part of the governmental [civil service] examinations.
6. Censured those who attempted to delay the establishment of the Peking Imperial University.
7. Urged that the Lu-Han railway should be prosecuted with more vigor and expedition.
8. Advised the adoption of Western arms and drill for all the Tartar troops.
9. Ordered the establishment of agricultural schools in all the provinces to teach the farmers improved methods of agriculture.
10. Ordered the introduction of patent and copyright laws.
11. The Board of War and Foreign Office were ordered to report on the reform of the military examinations.
12. Special rewards were offered to inventors and authors.
13. The officials were ordered to encourage trade and assist merchants.
14. School boards were ordered established in every city in the empire.
15. Bureaus of Mines and Railroads were established.
16. Journalists were encouraged to write on all political subjects.
17. Naval academies and training-ships were ordered.
18. The ministers and provincial authorities were called upon to assist—nay were begged to make some effort to understand what he was trying to do and help him in his efforts at reform.
19. Schools were ordered in connection with all the Chinese legations in foreign

countries for the benefit of the children of Chinese in those places.

20. Commercial bureaus were ordered in Shanghai for the encouragement of trade.

21. Six useless Boards in Beijing were abolished.

22. The right to memorialize the throne in sealed memorials was granted to all who desired to do so.

23. Two presidents and four vice-presidents of the Board of Rites were dismissed for disobeying the emperor's orders that memorials [petitions, memorandums, etc.] should be allowed to come to him unopened.

24. The governorships of Hubei, Guangdong, and Yunnan were abolished as being a useless expense to the country.

25. Schools of instruction in the preparation of tea and silk were ordered established.

26. The slow courier posts were abolished in favor of the Imperial Customs Post.

27. A system of budgets as in Western countries was approved.

I have given these decrees in this epitomized form so that all those who are interested in the character of this reform movement in China may understand something of the influence the young emperor's study had had upon him. Grant that they followed one another in too close proximity, yet still it must be admitted by every careful student of them, that there is not one that would not have been of the greatest possible benefit to the country if they had been put into operation. If the emperor had been allowed to proceed, making them all as effective as he did the Imperial University, and if the ministers and provincial authorities had responded to his call, and had made "some effort to understand what he was trying to do," China might have by this time been close upon the heels of Japan in the adoption of Western ideas.

Source: Headland, Isaac Taylor. *Court Life in China: The Capital, its Officials and People*. New York: F.H. Revell, 1909. 355-356, 137-139.

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