

CHINESE CULTURAL HISTORY – 19th Century

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Culture

Religion. Chinese civilization was very mature (some may view it as ancient) by the 19th century. No new religions or governing philosophies emerged to challenge the orthodoxy of Confucianism and Daoism. The only exception was the Taiping movement, which was so violent and heretical in its belief system that many Chinese Christians were unable to support even its spiritual elements. As might be expected, there was a backlash among the governing elites against Christianity in the post-Taiping era. Indeed, in the decade or so after the Taiping Rebellion, there was a strong reactive movement to return China to its true Confucian path. There were several “self-strengthening” reforms instituted, most of which had as a stated goal the return of the people to more moral and upright behavior among all segments of society. When the final of the “self-strengthening” reforms (the 100 Days of Reform) was instituted in 1898, it had as one of its core elements the re-interpretation of Confucianism which, if taken to its logical end, could have questioned the political position of the Empress Dowager. For his trouble, the Emperor Guangxu—who had supported and promoted this effort—was effectively placed under house arrest where he was assassinated in 1908 by arsenic poisoning. It appeared that traditional Confucianism, as interpreted by the ruling elites, was sacrosanct from both the spiritual and political perspective.

The Literary Arts. The late Qing period is not known for bold or innovative steps taken in the writing of fiction or other literary arts. Many authors and poets spent their entire careers writing about how to navigate the violence and turmoil of the turbulent 19th century. In the reform movements of the post-Taiping era, a number of Chinese traveled abroad and were exposed to vibrant and expansive cultural expressions seen in the literary and philosophical world—particularly in Japan. Some returned to China to become leading philosophers and authors. One such author is Huang Zunxian (1845-1905), who worked for the Chinese delegation in Tokyo, London and San Francisco. Huang respected tradition and was not a radical (as evidenced by his profession), but his poetry pressed the boundaries of literary convention. He is remembered for popularizing the word “civilization” 文明 (*wénmíng*—roughly interpreted “enlightenment through letters”). Others, such as Kang Youwei (1858-1927), an influential Chinese thinker who went into exile in Japan in 1898, continued to have influence well into the 20th century. Among Kang’s most influential works are the *Datong Shu* (Book on the Great Community) and *Kongzi Gaizhi Kao* (The Study of the Reforms of Confucius). The latter formed part of the basis of the aborted 100 Days of Reform.