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A Background Guide in Brief

for the

*Advisors to the Guangxu
Emperor, 1898*

This Background Guide in Brief is an abbreviated version of your committee's Background Guide, and should provide you with a roadmap for important themes and topics as you begin preliminary research on the committee topic. This document is simply one resource available to you as you prepare for HMUN China, and all delegates are strongly urged to read and study the full Background Guide for their committees. Background Guides will be released on 1 November, 2019. Good luck with your preparation!

The Advisors to the Guangxu Emperor, 1898 is based primarily on the historical Grand Council of the Qing Dynasty, with a few changes to improve the committee experience. Historically, the council was founded during the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1722-1735) as the Office of Military Finance. By the time of the reign of the Qianlong Emperor, however, this relatively small government office expanded in size and importance and was thenceforth known as the Grand Council. For most of the Qing era, only six or seven advisers sat on the council, though they were assisted by a secretarial staff of 250 or more. The Grand Council became a central figure in the Qing court, processing and filing memorials (official communications sent for review to the central bureaucracy in Beijing) and directing the flow of communications to the Emperor and to various government ministries. Often, the Grand Councilors would summarize or comment on memorials which were then sent to the emperor for review. They thus had great influence over policy decisions. Despite the Council's impressive policy-making power, the organization's status was largely unofficial. As a result, the Council was not subjected to most of the protocols that checked the power of other government agencies. Additionally, because the Council met and operated within the Forbidden City, the councilors were constantly aware of events in the most secretive parts of the imperial court and usually had the ear of the emperor.

For our purposes, we will assume that the Council has been expanded in recent years to include a larger number of potential advisers and has been convened to address the specific problems that

threaten the stability of the Qing dynasty in 1898. Officials, generals, reformers, intellectuals, statesmen, and members of the imperial family have all been recruited by the young Guangxu Emperor (as well as his shrewd aunt, the Empress Dowager Cixi) to devise a plan to restore the power of the monarchy and decide the course of China's future. Although the Grand Council ultimately remains an advising body to an autocratic ruler, Guangxu's age and open-mindedness mean that the councilors will have a huge impact on the policies enacted by the Qing court.



Figure 1: Empress Cixi

Governed from Beijing, the Chinese Empire in the late Qing dynasty was a huge and politically unified entity under the rule of the emperor, which consisted of all of modern China and Mongolia as well as small parts of Southeast and Central Asia. This vast territory was made up of various ethnic groups. However, the majority of the population, despite being governed by Manchu elites, was Han Chinese.

The governmental structure of the Qing dynasty was a highly organized bureaucracy founded upon ancient Confucian ideals of government. Officials were selected through an extremely rigorous civil service examination that was theoretically

available to any segment of society, excluding merchants, and tested would-be administrators on their knowledge of the Confucian classics and classical literature. Those who passed the examination were divided into one of several categories based on their scores. A shengyuan degree was awarded to those who excelled at the county-level examination, and a juren was given to those candidates who achieved success at the provincial level. Those who placed well at the national examination were awarded the title of gongshi, and the very highest rank of those who performed well at the specially administered palace examinations were awarded the highly prestigious jinshi degree.

Successful jinshi degree holders were usually appointed by the emperor to administer China's provinces, and lower degree holders would form a hierarchy of officialdom reaching from the county level up to the emperor himself. While pass rates for the imperial civil service examination were very low, becoming a high-ranking official was viewed as the primary way by which an intelligent young man could advance himself. As a result, education was highly respected in China as a path to wealth and success.

Throughout China's history, Confucianism was the dominant system of morality. Confucianism stresses virtue and righteousness through correct and appropriate relationships between individuals and institutions (i.e. father and son, husband and wife, ruler and ruled, friend and friend). This framework largely inspired the above-mentioned system of governance that prevailed in China until the collapse of the Qing dynasty. Besides Confucianism, Buddhism (particularly Tibetan Buddhism), Taoism, and Islam all had a substantial number of followers during the Qing dynasty.

In this setting, China in 1898 is a time of massive turmoil. Corruption runs rampant in the government's ranks, famines ravage the countryside, and foreign powers threaten to invade at any moment. Chinese peasants seem to be on the brink of revolt, and there are rumours

of betrayal amongst the Emperor's own ranks. The entire political structure of China is at risk, with instability and possible rebellion lurking in northern China. Clearly, China is at a crossroads. At the center of these conflicts are The Advisors to the Guangxu Emperor.



Figure 2: The Guangxu Emperor

Delegates will have to face the tough crises surrounding the Emperor in 1898 and deal with the issues at hand swiftly and decisively. Members of the committee must work together in this fast-paced, challenging environment to ensure that China lives to see the 20th century. Will the Advisors succeed, or will China fall apart entirely? The answer is up to you.