Assess the effectiveness of reform and revolution as ways to modernize China up to 1920.

Modernization can be defined as the process of making one country up-to-date as to suit into the modern world. A successful modernization is that a country would transform itself from a backward country to a modern state with political, social, economic and education system similar to the modernized nations. For example, the Meiji Modernization had successfully transform Japan from an isolated and largely backward country into a rich country with a modern army and navy. She could be regarded as “the Britain of the East”, powerful and modernized. In China, there were several reforms and revolution carried out from the mid-18th century to 1920 as ways to modernize China. But indeed, some of them were not very effective while some of them had limited achievements only. The Self-strengthening Movement (1860-94) was not very effective in modernizing China. It just had very superficial attempts at military and diplomatic modernizations. The Kang-Liang Reform (1898) was not very effective as well. Although it tried to learn Western institutions, some of the reform programmes hurt the vested interests of different social classes that led to strong opposition against the reform. Finally, it ended in failure without much achievement. The Late Qing Reform (1901-10) was not very ineffective by the virtue of lack of sincerity of the Qing government. The 1911 revolution was not effective to modernize China. The problems of social, economic, and foreign aggression still existed. The Intellectual Revolution was quite effective in modernizing China. It marked a further shift away from the traditional Chinese base toward complete Westernization.

The Self-strengthening Movement was not very effective in modernizing China. It was served as a means to strengthen China in term of diplomatic and military modernization and industrialization. It aimed at expelling the “barbarians” from China. The military modernization indeed tried to modernize China, for example, the imitation of western technology was seen as a form of military modernization. Since the scholar-gentry witnessed and saw the “strength” and “power” of western armaments, they admitted such military superiority; therefore they wanted to learn from the barbarians in order to contain the barbarians. However, the scope of activities was very limited to the adoption of western firearms, machines and warships, the establishment of army and navy and the building of heavy and light industries. It seem that all these represented the superficial attempts at modernization. Moreover, the reformers tried to restore the military forces into the domestic order. There were no any new elements and reshuffle on the traditional military system. The reformers failed to assimilate Western military system. Owing to the narrow coverage on the
military modernization and the limited vision of the reformers, it was not effective in modernizing China militarily. The basic weakness was exposed in the French War (1884-85), when China, after 20 years preparations, was unable to defend its tributary state, Annam. This could reveal the ineffectiveness of the military modernization.

Besides, the industrialization was a complete failure in modernizing China economically. The industrialization was a supplement to the military modernization. It was also seen as a “means” to have “power and wealth” in China. Although there was the emphasis on profit-oriented enterprises like shipping, railways, mining and telegraph and the building of heavy and light industries, the implantation was full of problems. For instance, there was a shortage of bureaucratic as well as private capital, which restricted the initiation and growth of industries and enterprises. Also, the fixed tariffs and custom duties which imposed in the unequal treaties led to the decline of native industries. The domestic industrial products could not compete with the influx of foreign goods. Besides, the reform leaders did not lay the foundation for a modern economy. They also tried to maintain an “agrarian society” in China. Therefore, the industrialization was ineffective in modernizing China’s economy. It was because the goal of the industrialization in achieving “power and wealth” in China could not be contained.

As a whole, the Self-strengthening Movement indeed had very limited achievements in modernizing China by the virtue of limited vision. The scope of it just very limited to firearms, ships, machines, communications, mining, and light industries. No attempts were made to assimilate Western institutions, philosophy, arts, and culture. The Self-strengthening Movement efforts barely scratched the surface of modernization, without achieving a breakthrough in industrialization. In reality, the reform leaders such as Li and Zeng neglected the Western political systems and culture that contributed to the narrow coverage of the reform. They were ignorant of the modern world and blind to modernization. The reform leaders never dreamed of remaking China into a modern state. In fact, they strove to strengthen the existing order rather to replace it. They had absolutely no conception of economic development, industrial revolution, and modern transformation. But still, the old institutions of military, political, culture and economy remained dominant. Most importantly, the efforts in the Self-strengthening were totally destroyed by the defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95).

The Kang-Liang Reform (18980 was not very effective in modernizing China. It aimed at making China strong so as to resist foreign aggression. However, unlike the
Self-strengthening Movement, it was more comprehensive. It brought changes not only in the military, but also in the education, political, social and economic systems. The introduction of education reform and the new political system were the most remarkable achievements of the Kang-Liang Reform (1898). The Self-strengthening did not dare to reform this two aspects, and the education reform and the new political system which introduced in the new reform were similar to Meiji Japan. Regarding the education reforms, the reformers attempted to acquire Western knowledge in order to improve education in China. For example, the old civil service examination system based on the Chinese Classics was ordered abolished, and a new system of primary and secondary schools was established. The most important effort was the establishment of an Imperial University in Beijing. All of these measures tried to modernize China’s education system; and some of the measures were even similar to the education reforms in Meiji Japan as well, such as the establishment of a new school system. But they were not very effective in modernizing China. After the failure of the Kang-Liang Reform (1898), only the establishment of an Imperial University in Beijing was allowed. Other measures were reversed.

Politically, the reshuffle of the government administration could be seen as a way to modern China’s political system. For instance, sinecures were abolished to improve the efficiency of the government. And there was the appointment of young and energetic officials to replace the conservatives. Corruption was also to be abolished. All these measures showed that Kang and Liang tried to learn from the Western government administration as to improve China’s traditional political system and to create a more efficient government in China. However, they were not ineffective to modernize China. It was because after Cixi staged a coup d’etat, all these reform measures were reversed. For example, the seven sinecure offices and three governorships abolished during the Kang-Liang Reform (1898) were reinstated.

Although Kang-Liang Reform (1898) really introduced more reform to modernize China, it was not effective at all. It was because it faced strong opposition. Since there were too many changes, the vested interests of many different social classes were hurt. That meant vested interests and achievements of reform could not co-exist in Qing China. Therefore, strong opposition against the Kang-Liang Reform (1898) piled up before any important achievement could be resulted.

However, there was some degree to a continuation of modern reform. The Imperial University at Beijing and the colleges at provincial capitals were allowed to continue, while the high schools and elementary schools at the prefectural and district levels
could also operate if they suited local conditions.

The main aim of the Late-Qing Reform was to re-centralize China, as centralization had been the ruling principle for the past governments. It was because the phenomenon of decentralization had become very serious in 1900s, for example, the declaration of neutrality by the southeast provinces during the Eight-Power Expedition Force (1900). Undeniably, the Qing government concerned the government’s interests rather than national interests. They had no intention to modernize China, but instead, the Late-Qing Reform was an instrument to prolong the Manzu rule.

The Late Qing Reform was not very effective in modernizing China. The program did not have much substance or promise of accomplishment. Only three concrete improvements were actually made, namely the abolition of the civil service examinations; the establishment of modern schools; and the sending of students abroad.

In addition to the Cixi’s insincerity, anti-Chinese discrimination and incapable Manzu leadership also contributed to the ineffectiveness of the program. Important appointments were given to Manzus to an increasing extent. The Superintendency of Political Affairs, for instance, was controlled by Ronglu, a Manzu. This one-sided distribution of offices became even more evident after the deaths of the elder Chinese statemen Li Hongzhang in 1901 and Liu Kunyi in 1902. The prospect for successful reform became even more remote.

The 1911 Revolution was regarded as the milestone and a turning point in Chinese history. It succeeded in driving out the Manzus, restoring Chinese rule and establishing a republic. It brought an end to the dynastic system which had existed for more than 2,000 years. A new form of government, a republican government, was established which attempted to govern with the consent of the people.

However, the 1911 revolution was not effective to modernize China. Although a new form of government, a republican government, was established, it failed to modernize China and made her strong. Contradictory, it was an incomplete one with many unfortunate repercussions. First of all, the 1911 Revolution did not bring real democracy to China. There was few paid attention to the more important task of democratic reconstruction. For instance, revolutionaries handed the power over to an ambitious man, Yuan Shikai. Later, Yuan betrayed the constitution. He became a
dictator and attempted to restore the monarchy. In this way, China was once again restore to her traditional political system. Secondly, most of the revolutionaries devoted themselves to the overthrow of the Manzus and the establishment of the republic; few paid attention to the more urgent task of the problem of people’s livelihood. The 1911 Revolution did not bring about the socio-economic reforms that the Chinese needed most at that time. China remained backward and Chinese people suffered economic hardship. Besides, despite the success of the revolution in overthrowing the Manzu rule, China was still unable to resist foreign aggression. The unequal treaties still existed. The forced acceptance of the Twenty-One Demand (1915) presented by Japan in 1915 further revealed the unsolved problem.

The founding of the republic had not brought peace, order and unity. Instead, the early republican years were characterized by moral degradation, monarchist movements, warlordism, and intensified foreign imperialism. Obviously, political face lifting through the adoption of republican institutions was insufficient to regenerate the nation. China’s economic, social and cultural institutions still remained outdated. The intellectual revolution, taking place somewhere between 1917 and 1923, hailed a New Cultural Movement which has sometimes been described, perhaps, exaggeratedly, as a “Chinese Renaissance.” A high point in this turbulent period was the gigantic student demonstration in the Beijing on May 4. 1919, which quickly awaked nationwide response. Hence this period is also commonly known as that of May Fourth Movement.

The intellectual revolution of 1917-20 represents China’s third stage of response to the Western impacts. The first stage – the Self-strengthening Movement from 1861-1895 – saw superficial attempts at diplomatic and military modernizations, and the second – the era of reform and revolution from 1898-1912 – witnessed the acceptance of Western political institutions. The intellectual awakening of 1917-20 marked a further shift away from the traditional Chinese base toward complete Westernization. By 1920, China was very much a part of the modern world.

In reality, the May Fourth Movement was quite effective in modernizing China. It was essentially a socio-politico-intellectual revolution aimed at achieving national independence, individual emancipation, and creation of a new culture through a critical and scientific re-evaluation of the national heritage and selected acceptance of foreign civilization. Leaders of the movement regarded a radical change in the “thought base” as a prerequisite to successful modernization and national regeneration.
Western science, democracy, and culture should be the foundation of a new order while the old customs, literature, social, economic and political institutions should be come under disparaging attack to make way for the new. The May Fourth Movement had been far more effective at destroying the past than at constructing the future.

Besides, there were two main achievements in modernizing China. First, the literary revolution led to the establishment of the Plain Language in 1920. Second, the intensification of nationalism stimulated the rise of a Young China, extremely sensitive to its perilous position in the modern world and jealous of guiding its own destiny. Such an attitude generated psychological reconstruction and national confidence which partially compensated for the sense of inadequacy and inferiority that had built up over the decades.

After all, the intellectual revolution succeeded primarily in introducing Western thought and destroying Chinese traditionalism, rather than creating new systems of thought and new schools of philosophy. But it laid down a foundation to adapt foreign ideas and institutions creatively to the Chinese situation.

By and large, the reform and revolution in China up to 1920 were not very effective in modernizing China. The Self-strengthening Movement (1861-95) just had very superficial attempts at diplomatic and military modernizations. The Kang-Liang Reform (1898) and the Late-Qing Reform (1901-10) just witnessed the acceptance of Western political institutions. But indeed, they failed to make any remarkable achievements. And the 1911 Revolution could not modernize China since it failed to solve the basic problems in China. It was a “nuisance” rather than a “blessing” to China. The Intellectual Revolution in 1917-20 was quite effective. It marked a further shift away from the traditional Chinese base toward complete Westernization. By 1920, China was very much a part of the modern world.