

China's Self-Strengthening Movement and Japan's Meiji Restoration

By Guanqiao Huang

Abstract

When some countries in history implement policies that respond to a certain global trend, other states may react carefully to this new trend. They may or may not make changes due to their domestic circumstances, and sometimes their choice matters and has a profound impact on that nation's future outlook. This essay examines the similarities and differences between China and Japan's decision to modernize when both Asian states were under threat of growing Western influence. It focuses on the differences between China's Self-strengthening Movement (1861-1895) and Japan's Meiji Restoration (started in 1868), exploring the potential factors that contributed to the distinct result of these two movements: Japan quickly modernized and became a superpower in East Asia, while China's activists were not as prominent in changing the nation's hardship of being suppressed by foreign powers through advanced technology. To accomplish this objective, the essay evaluates the differences in goals and approaches between each modernization movement. The findings indicate that the goals, strength of activists, and governmental reforming tactics caused the dramatic distinction.

China's Self-Strengthening Movement and Japan's Meiji Restoration:

Why Were Their Outcomes Distinct?

In the latter half of the 19th century, western nations consolidated their power and technological domination over the other parts of the world by industrializing. Inventions such as electric lights, the telephone, and other improved products like mass produced steel greatly elevated people's standard of living; modern consumer culture appeared in densely-populated regions in Europe and North America. As these societies thrived, traditional agricultural-based economies on the other side of the world like China and Japan were trailing behind. When these Eastern countries were in jeopardy, reformers and progressives attempted to empower their societies through either political reforms or technological improvements to enable them to stand firm against increasing western interest in Asia. In China, progressives and patriots demanded self-improvement, participating in the Self-Strengthening Movement. In Japan, the Meiji Restoration commenced after progressives overturned the Shogun, and this was a remarkable example of success in modernizing a country from a feudal society to a super power. The experience and fate of these two countries were similar in a number of aspects, yet the results of their modernization made their histories distinct. Japan surprisingly became more and more competitive in Asia, and gradually even started invasions of Korea and China. This alarmed western forces, because there was an Eastern power that could achieve what the west had achieved. What could possibly make their fates completely different?

First of all, the progressives in China and Japan set completely opposite goals, so the extents of the Self-Strengthening Movement and the Meiji Restoration were different. In late Qing China, a sense of crisis had continued to rise since the country's failure in its confrontation with the British army during the First Opium War (1839-1842). In the Treaty of Nanking (1842), China ceded Hong Kong to the British, and the country was falling into a consistent regression. Throughout the entire country, the fear of foreign domination was increasing. China was in danger; western imperialists were violating its sovereignty, while at the same time the internal political situation remained unstable. During the First and Second Opium Wars, the Chinese military was incompetent overall when under British attack. Furthermore, organized troops were even incapable of suppressing the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) --a group that consisted mainly of farmers. Such disadvantages made it an impossible objective to guard the entire country from external violation. Acknowledging this impending crisis, progressives hoped the Qing authorities could restore power in order to prevent any additional humiliation by self-strengthening and self-enriching. As Feng Guifen, one of those progressives, had pointed out: the root of the crisis was in China itself, and it must be changed by learning from the west: "Why are the Western nations small and yet strong? Why are we large and yet weak? We must search for the means to become their equal, and that depends solely on human effort... In the matching of words with deeds, we are inferior to the barbarians. The remedy is to seek the causes in ourselves. This can be changed at once if only the emperor would set us in the right direction."¹ They appealed to the authorities to learn from the west and curb them, and to use the Chinese essence to adopt western methods. In other words, the primary goals of the Qing progressives were shifting focus to technological developments; they had less interest in transforming the feudal system.

¹ Quotations: Qing Dynasty, Alpha History, accessed January 2021,

On the other hand, Japan experienced a large-scale regime subversion. Japan's position was similar to that of China at first; both countries were following the doctrine of isolationism by adopting restrictions on trade. During the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867), the Sakoku policy hampered interactions with foreign nations by permitting trade in Nagasaki only. In 1853, American battleships entered Edo Bay, demanding that Japan open the door for trade. If not, they would attack. This historical event fostered the development of the Kanagawa Treaty (1854), which forced Japan to open Shimoda and Hakodate.² Afraid of a potential war with the United States, the Japanese authorities made a concession. Unfortunately, the Treaty of Kanagawa was not the only example of western intervention in Japan's isolationist policy. In 1858, the Treaty of Amity and Commerce again corroborated the west's infringement on Japanese sovereignty: the US's new role of most favoured nation and consular jurisdiction.³ This granted them a superior position when it came to negotiations with Japan on subjects of trade. The US took away the power of determining rates and tariffs from Japan.⁴ The more times the foreigners took advantage, the more obvious it became that Japan's status was fading. Reacting to western powers scrambling for influence, Japanese nationalists adopted a xenophobic approach. To empower their nation, many determined nationalists promoted the slogan of "Revere the emperor, expel the barbarians," hoping this could bring substantial benefit.⁵ However, as the Shimonoseki campaign took place, more patriots embraced the conviction that

² Treaty of Kanagawa Signed with Japan, History.com, A&E Television Networks, last modified March 30, 2020, accessed January 28, 2021, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/treaty-of-kanagawa-signed-with-japan>

Atsushi, Kawai, The Meiji Restoration: The End of the Shogunate and the Building of a Modern Japanese State, nippon.com, Nov 29, 2018, <https://www.nippon.com/en/views/b06902/>

³ Atsushi, Kawai, The Meiji Restoration: The End of the Shogunate and the Building of a Modern Japanese State, nippon.com, Nov 29, 2018, <https://www.nippon.com/en/views/b06902/>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Barshay, Andrew, Shinron, Japanese Historical Text Initiative, University of California at Berkeley, September 4, 2014, accessed January 2021, <https://jhti.berkeley.edu/texts22.htm>

only by overturning the Shogunate's feudalism, could Japan save itself from unprecedented western aggression. In the following Boshin War between the anti-Shogunate groups and the Tokugawa Shogunate, the anti-Shogunate forces defeated the old administration, laying a solid foundation for a new era.⁶ In 1868, the Imperial Oath of the Five Articles settled the path for Japan for the next few decades; it offered an opportunity for the nation to improve its capacity in every domain. This was the dawn of Japan's modernization. Since its beginning, Japan's modernization was distinct from that of China, because it was centered on the transition of the political structure. In contrast, the Chinese were still following their traditional form of government. In short, one was a superficial competitive emulation, one was thorough revolution.

Because of this dramatic difference, the Chinese and Japanese were moving in two directions. In Qing China, with assistance from progressive Li Hongzhang, a leading figure of the Self-Strengthening Movement, a number of modern machinery factories were established in order to fill the gap between China's technology and that of the west. For example, one of the most successful ones was the Jiangnan Arsenal, which was one of the biggest arsenals in Asia. It contributed to the production of the first Chinese-manufactured modern steamship in 1868.⁷ In addition, the staff there also promoted education by translating foreign texts and science books into Chinese. Thanks to the help of reformers, a group of enterprises such as the Tianjin Machine Factory and the Fuzhou Navy Yard alleviated the crisis to some extent.⁸ With these growing industries, China accomplished breakthroughs in the national defense sector, due to the fact that

⁶ Atsushi, Kawai, The Meiji Restoration: The End of the Shogunate and the Building of a Modern Japanese State, nippon.com, Nov 29, 2018, <https://www.nippon.com/en/views/b06902/>

⁷ Jiangnan Arsenal, Britannica, accessed 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jiangnan-Arsenal>

⁸ Foreign Relations in the 1860s, Britannica, accessed 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/China/Foreign-relations-in-the-1860s#ref590540>

factories were mastering modern skills they did not know well in the past: ship-building, manufacturing naval mines, firearm production, and iron-smelting.

Chinese officials had been groping for new models of enterprise management. Li Hongzhang also helped found the China Merchants Steamship Navigation Company, and this booming company quickly expanded its business to Southeast Asia and Japan, competing with western navigation companies.⁹ To an extent, it broke through foreign companies' monopolies in that field. Besides Li's effort, Zeng Guofan, Zuo Zongtang and other progressives also participated in enterprise-building. In order to cope with the government's financial difficulties, many new companies and enterprises employed the operation method of "government-supervised and merchant-managed."¹⁰ The Qing government was limited by economic deficits and revenue shortages, so to get as many firms and investment as they could in a short time span, officials counted on private investors. As sufficient amounts of capital resources were gathered, official bureaus took charge of running the businesses. Shanghai Mechanical Textile Bureau and Kaiping Mining Bureau belonged to this category of new businesses.¹¹ The government granted these enterprises opportunities. For example, Li Hongzhang's China Merchants Steamship

⁹ Feuerwerker, Albert; Lai, Chi-kong; Liu, Kwang-ching, China Merchant Steam Navigation Company, Encyclopaedia.com, December 16, 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/china-merchants-steam-navigation-company>

¹⁰ 官督商办, Baidu Baike, accessed 2020, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/官督商办>
Kucha, Glenn; Llewellyn, Jennifer, The Self-Strengthening Movement, alpha history, accessed 2020, <https://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/self-strengthening-movement/>

¹¹ 上海机器局布局, Baidu Baike, accessed 2020, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/上海机器局布局>

官督商办, Baidu Baike, accessed 2020, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/官督商办>

Navigation Company was receiving government-signed contracts for shipping the collected grain duties to the capital. Other forms of stimulation were loans and monopoly power.¹²

In addition to forming new enterprises and corporations, Chinese reformers advocated for science and nurtured experts. Newspapers and other publications were sources where people could receive academic knowledge and scholarly reviews. According to Zhang Xiantao's book *The Origin of the Modern Chinese Press*, the newspaper *Wanguo Gongbao* covered information about modern technologies like the telegraph and railroads, and other subjects like astronomy, chemistry and mathematics.¹³ New schools offered education in the fields of western language and literature, and enrolled students could be responsible for translating texts into Chinese. Initiated in 1862, the Tongwen Guan offered language curricula to students, including English, Russian, Japanese, French, and German for instance. At first, the school had an enrollment of only 30 students, but this number increased to 163 in 1879.¹⁴ Another remarkable achievement was the founding of up-to-date military schools teaching modern technologies, providing China

¹² Feuerwerker, Albert; Lai, Chi-kong; Liu, Kwang-ching, China Merchant Steam Navigation Company, Encyclopaedia.com, December 16, 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/china-merchants-steam-navigation-company>

¹³ Zhang, Xiantao, *The Origins of the Modern Chinese Press*, Routledge, accessed 2020, https://books.google.com/books?id=ujKj6_1u8PEC&pg=PA47&lpg=PA47&dq=Church+News+Qing&source=bl&ots=TceNKEtaDl&sig=ACfU3U0WInVrNYw5vSH2M0MPVONGf4XGRg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwje7MiSr5jqAhWNJDQIHcFxCDCQ6AEwAHoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=Church%20News%20Qing&f=false

¹⁴ Tongwenguan, Britannica, accessed 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tongwenguan>
Chen, Fei, Negotiating for Modern Education: The Politics behind the Curriculum and Admissions Reforms at the Tongwen Guan, *Sungkyunkwan University, Academy of East Asian Studies*, Vol.17, Number 1, April 2017, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/667737/pdf>

with more professional staff members.¹⁵ This was the fundamental factor for the establishment of the Beiyang Fleet--theoretically the strongest fleet in Asia, containing 78 vessels at its peak.¹⁶

In spite of these accomplishments, the process of the Self-strengthening movement ended up failing. First of all, the opinions of Chinese officials were polarized. The conservative side constantly attacked and slandered the progress made by reformers. Such division and polarization left no space for any potential reconciliations. As a result, few significant achievements were made due to the fact that officials were not united. One argument used by the conservatives was that implementing western technology was a disgrace to China's dignity and glory. They perceived western skills as undesirable inventions, even though much of their own equipment was outmoded already. This may be partially attributed to their blind arrogance and xenophobic sentiment toward the west.¹⁷ As for the circumstances of reform-minded progressives, their power had no guarantee nor consolidation when they proposed plans. The progressives' headquarters were mainly distributed among the nation's provincial and regional governments, so China was unable to facilitate the movement on a national scale.¹⁸ This was because a number of officials in the central government tended to be more receptive to conservative opinions.¹⁹ For example, when Li Hongzhang was advocating for an elongation of Jingu railway to Tongzhou, he faced drastic accusations. The conservatives pointed out "three sins" of a railroad: it first supports enemy industry, second disrupts tranquility and disturbs local

¹⁵ Kucha, Glenn; Llewellyn, Jennifer, The Self-Strengthening Movement, alpha history, accessed 2020, <https://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/self-strengthening-movement/>

¹⁶ Beiyang Fleet, Historica, Fandom, accessed 2020, https://historica.fandom.com/wiki/Beiyang_Fleet

¹⁷ Kucha, Glenn; Llewellyn, Jennifer, The Self-Strengthening Movement, alpha history, accessed 2020, <https://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/self-strengthening-movement/>

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

residents, third it takes away civilians' jobs.²⁰ Many of these accusations were not based on logical inference, but based on biased sensational attacks.

The second reason the Self-Strengthening Movement failed was that many Chinese officials had little enthusiasm for perfecting their political system. The progressives agreed that the purpose of self-strengthening was for the defense of the nation, but the means for accomplishing this was technology. It seems they neglected social and cultural factors, especially the modernist ideology. For them, the linchpin was to preserve, rather than to change.

The third reason was that many new industries and companies could barely escape failure. The mode of "government-supervised and merchant-managed" ultimately led to malpractice and corruption.²¹ Officials may have taken the advantage and dominated the operational process, excluding real experts from being promoted. Some of these self-interest-motivated officials turned these companies into bureaucracies, ruining the future of the market. By means of embezzlement, corrupt officials destroyed the opportunity for building China up, while their pockets swelled.

Japan's Meiji Restoration was a different story in that a strong and regulatory national government was created. By 1871, the new government reorganized the units of administration, by abolishing all feudal classes and domains. Replacing old administrative units, the nation was divided into 72 prefectures.²² Old classes like Samurai lost privileges and power. This effectively

²⁰ 李□岳, 胡□, 洋□派与□固派关于□路□□的争□, 吉林大学社会科学学□, pages 83-87, accessed 2020,

<https://www.ixueshu.com/document/e6e263e403010050318947a18e7f9386.html>

²¹ 官督商□, government-supervised and merchant-managed. Baidu Baike, accessed 2020, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/官督商□>

²² The Meiji Restoration and Modernization, Asia for Educators, accessed 2020,

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1750_meiji.htm

Atsushi, Kawai, The Meiji Restoration: The End of the Shogunate and the Building of a Modern Japanese State, nippon.com, Nov 29, 2018, <https://www.nippon.com/en/views/b06902/>

centralized Japan's power, integrating the entire nation politically. This development smashed Japan's intense regionalism. Furthermore, the concentration of power in the Emperor's hand led to greater capacity for such an agricultural-based nation to transform its economic makeup in a relatively short time frame.

Other policies likewise demonstrated how the bureaucracy was centralizing power and integrating the economy via regulations. For instance, the government unified the nation's currency under the New Currency Act of 1871.²³ The Bank of Japan was chartered under the Bank of Japan Act in 1882.²⁴ This contributed to the circulation of money throughout the country and massive economic improvements. To address the government's revenue problem, a new tax was enacted in 1873. It declared 3% of the land value would be the amount of tax paid to the government.²⁵ Though government revenue still mainly came from agriculture and land-based tax payers, this new tax stabilized the government's source of income.

Another essential element of the restoration was education. It was telling that Japan had made education one of their priorities. Article 5 of the Charter Oath had already clarified the purpose of learning: "knowledge shall be sought all over the world, and the foundations of imperial rule shall be strengthened."²⁶ Japan adopted the policy in 1872 that it was obligatory for

The Opening of Japan, Britannica, accessed 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Japan/The-opening-of-Japan>

²³ Shau, Kevin, Early Japanese Currency, January 12, 2018, accessed January 2021, <https://kevinshau.medium.com/early-japanese-currency-4371edbbeb18#:~:text=Japan's%20modern%20currency%2C%20the%20Yen%2C%20only%20came%20into%20use%20during,the%201870s%20was%20rather%20complicated.>

²⁴ About the Bank, Bank of Japan, accessed January 2021, <https://www.boj.or.jp/en/about/outline/index.htm/>

²⁵ Atsushi, Kawai, The Meiji Restoration: The End of the Shogunate and the Building of a Modern Japanese State, nippon.com, Nov 29, 2018, <https://www.nippon.com/en/views/b06902/>

²⁶ The Charter Oath, Meiji Restoration: The Opening of Japan, weebly.com, accessed 2021, <https://meijirestoration11.weebly.com/charter-oath.html>

Japan History & Background, education.stateuniversity.com, accessed 2020, <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/736/Japan-HISTORY-BACKGROUND.html>

students in the entire country to learn at elementary schools.²⁷ This Gakusei policy enhanced the national government's involvement in public education. In 1890, Emperor Meiji approved the Imperial Rescript on Education, emphasizing the importance of Confucian values including deference, loyalty and decency. For example, the rescript asserted this viewpoint regarding civil obedience and service: "always respect the Constitution and observe the laws; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth."²⁸ This is a perfect example of how Japan prized high-level education and loyalty to the central government. Moreover, because this doctrine required deference to the Emperor, it further strengthened Meiji's influence on people's thoughts. This was later reflected by Japan's growing militarism and imperialism. The schools were places for students to learn about the west, and even Japan's popular culture was somehow shifting toward western values. This wave of westernization prompted every sector of society to move forward. Similar to China, Japan had many students who studied abroad, and many of them later became leaders. These intellectuals and scholars would eventually bring Japan to act out imperialism. Though both China and Japan focused on education reform, China's reform did not take place in a widespread way. Only a few of the students could receive the newest form of education.

To enrich Japan and make it more competitive, Emperor Meiji's restoration also focused on military and technology. Japan created a national army in 1872; the service act passed in the

²⁷ The Meiji Restoration and Modernization, Asia for Educators, accessed 2020, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1750_meiji.htm
Meiji Restoration, Britannica, accessed 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Meiji-Restoration>

²⁸ Imperial Rescript On Education, Japan, University of Pittsburgh, October 30, 1890, <https://www.japanpitt.pitt.edu/glossary/imperial-rescript-education>

same year made it mandatory for all healthy males over 20 years old to serve in the military.²⁹ Not only did the size of the army increase, but technology also advanced. The transportation system was marching forward with a notable speed: there were over 1,400 miles of railroads by the year of 1890.³⁰ Japan was advancing in multiple areas, politically, economically and militarily.

Ultimately, the most profound event during the Meiji Restoration was the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution. Imitating western constitutions, it guaranteed Japanese citizens' basic rights and freedoms, and announced the formation of the bicameral legislature.³¹ Democracy spread, and civilians' rights increased. However, this constitution was a combination of western philosophical ideas and Japanese characteristics. It also mentioned the Emperor's supreme and absolute power. Unlike China, Japan's modernization did not simply appropriate western tools, but it used the understanding of those values to create a thorough revolution to make a solid, permanent political change. Emperor Meiji utilized this opportunity to agglomerate the reformer's power, concentrating power in his hands.³² His decisions overall rendered Japan as a prosperous and modern Asian nation.

In the 1890s, China's defeat during the Sino-Japanese War represented the Self-Strengthening Movement's bankruptcy. This once powerful country now was tortured by colonialism and the west's imperialism. By then, the world climate was characterized by a social

²⁹ Atsushi, Kawai, The Meiji Restoration: The End of the Shogunate and the Building of a Modern Japanese State, nippon.com, Nov 29, 2018, https://www.nippon.com/en/views/b06902/The_Meiji_Restoration_and_Modernization,_Asia_for_Educators, accessed 2020, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1750_meiji.htm

³⁰ Meiji Restoration, Britannica, accessed 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Meiji-Restoration>

³¹ Atsushi, Kawai, The Meiji Restoration: The End of the Shogunate and the Building of a Modern Japanese State, nippon.com, Nov 29, 2018, https://www.nippon.com/en/views/b06902/The_Meiji_Restoration_and_Modernization,_Asia_for_Educators, accessed 2020, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1750_meiji.htm

³² Ibid

Darwinist mindset because the imperialists in industrialized societies started to take over other parts of the world. Japan again won the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, showing that it was eligible for the title of the only East Asian superpower. It became an active player on the world stage.

There are various reasons that made the results of the Self-Strengthening Movement and Meiji Restoration different. China's Self-Strengthening Movement pivoted more toward preservation of the traditional feudal system, despite applications of modern technologies and western models. It struggled with corruption and officials' polarized perspectives. In contrast, the Meiji Restoration was a reformation of the political system that came along with broader social and cultural change. Japan implemented policies at a national scale, because Emperor Meiji had concentrated the progressive power into one mighty force.

Guanqiao Huang is a junior at Pacific Academy in Irvine, California, drawing his passions from many personal interests in and outside of school. He enjoys learning history and social science as well as attending school activities and regional contests to broaden his horizons on global issues. He actively participates in his school's Model United Nations team that won the Award of Merit at the 2019 NHSMUN national contest. In addition, Guanqiao serves as the President of his school's Culture Club, developing his knowledge by learning the history and culture of different countries. As Vice-President of the Associated Student Body and the National Honor Society, Guanqiao has received high honors and top international student scholarship recognition for two years in a row.

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