

Struggles, Choices, Outcomes: Divergent Responses to Western Pressure in 19th Century China and Japan

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Abstract. In the 19th century, both China and Japan faced increasing pressure from the expanding Western powers, yet their responses diverged significantly, resulting to contrasting outcomes. This paper examines the struggles, choices and outcomes of their interactions with the West, highlighting the factor that shaped the national trajectories. While China under Qing dynasty resisted the engagement of Western influence, Japan embraced Westernization during Meiji Restoration. The responses of resisting and embracing of the two states facilitated the divergence, deciding on different destinies of being successful in the following routes and stagnating politically and economically. By analyzing what political decisions the governments have made, what outcomes were brought up having made their political decisions, economic outcomes and international influences. This study argues that the proactive approaches conducted by Japan ensured its strength and sovereignty, whereas the reactive approaches of China led to prolonged social, political and economic instability. This finding also contributes to a broader understanding of the modes of dealing with external pressures and the long-term consequences of different strategic choices.

Keywords: Western pressure, self-strengthening movement, Meiji restoration, industrial revolution, globalization.

1. Introduction

As western expansionist powers turned their attention to East Asia, this placed China and Japan under significant external pressures. However, beyond these external challenges, both states also had internal struggles that shaped their responses to foreign encroachment. China was passively opened up since the Opium War in 1840 [1-3]. After that, it was continuously threatened by a various unequal treaty due to defeated wars. For example, the Beijing Treaty was signed as a loss of war in the Second Opium War with Britain, France and Russian Empire in 1860 [4]. In addition to that, the corrupt Qing dynasty which had failing political institutions and irresponsible leaders were the direct cause of suffering of China. Even if China tried to self-help by having self-strengthening movement reforms, which covered almost a third of the century, the results were trivial and the country continued its endurance in the 20th century [5, 6]. On the other hand, Japan actively adapted the passive opening-up with the waning of Bakufu in the mid-19th century. Starting from 1968, Meiji Restoration had established a reformed economy, military, and cultural institutions. Consequently, Japan had gradually adapted to the essence of western institutions, making it the first non-western country to industrialize [7,8]. This would imply that under the threat of colonization and economic subjugation, as China and Japan pursued contrasting approaches to development, they were led to fundamentally different trajectories. This paper explores the struggles, choices, and long-term consequences of China and Japan's divergent responses to external pressure. It compares China's passive resistance to Japan's rapid response, and their attempts at reform. The paper evaluates the long-term impacts of the reforms, highlighting the Qing dynasty's failure and Japan's rise as a regional power.

2. Struggles and Choices: Passive Reaction or Active Opening up

2.1. Passive Reactions of China under the Qing Dynasty

At the peak of Qing dynasty, China's GDP accounts for 32.9% of the global economy, which laid a solid economic foundation for the Closed-Door Policy. The Qing government prided itself on

absolute centralization and self-sufficiency, and in order to protect its political and economic sovereignty, it excluded the capitalist economy by stopping all foreign exchange transactions [6]. The Qing was a believer in the Celestial Empire, having a belief in the superiority of its own civilization, and refused to interact with the West on an equal footing, resulting in an extremely conservative foreign policy and a Closed-Door Policy [4,6]. However, the British opened up the Chinese market through the opium trade, and the Qing government's attempts to ban smoking eventually led to the First Opium War from 1840 to 1842, in which the Qing government was forced to sign the Treaty of Nanjing, which ceded Hong Kong and opened up the five ports of China to trade [2]. This defeat exposed the military and economic weaknesses of the Qing dynasty, but the government still failed to carry out substantial reforms. Thereafter, in the Second Opium War, the Qing government failed in its diplomatic strategy and was forced to sign a series of Unequal Treaties, which led to a further loss of sovereignty and severe economic and political constraints by the Western powers [3,9]. Overall, the Qing Dynasty adopted a passive, conservative and cavalier attitude in the face of Western pressures. Although it maintained a stable rule in the short term, the lack of thoroughgoing reforms ultimately led to the country's long-term weakening and inability to adapt to global changes.

2.2. Japanese Quick Response to Passive Openness

In 1853, the U.S. Navy arrived in Japan with a fleet of ships and forced the Shogunate to open its ports in what is known as the Black Ships Shock [8]. Faced with the threat of force from the U.S., Japan was unable to refuse and was forced to enter the international system with the signing of the Treaty of Kanagawa. Since then, the failure of the Shogunate's diplomacy triggered strong discontent in the country, and the idea of Revere the Emperor and Expel the Barbarians rose, and opposition to the Shogunate's rule grew rapidly, which ultimately contributed to the outbreak of the Anti-Shogunate Movements, and the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the first of its kind [8]. Unlike the Qing dynasty, Japan was initially passive in opening up. Instead of struggling to maintain conservative, Japan quickly adjusted its policies to learn from Western political, military, and economic models, put forward a development strategy of moving away from Asia and into Europe, and actively promoted modernization and reform. This attitude of rapid adaptation enabled Japan to complete its social transformation in a short period of time, laying a solid foundation for the subsequent road to power.

2.3. Reform: Self-Strengthening Movement of China

The Self-Strengthening Movement was a reform movement promoted in the context of the Qing government's internal and external problems, emphasizing the principle of “Chinese learning as essence, Western learning for practical use” [5]. The movement mainly focused on military and industrial fields, such as the establishment of a modern navy named Beiyang Naval Division and the establishment of military enterprises called Jiangnan Manufacturing Bureau, but the reforms have never been able to break through the institutional limitations, neither did it involve the change of the political institutions, and still maintains the feudal and authoritarian system of imperial power. In addition, the foreign affairs enterprises managed by bureaucrats, the lack of market mechanisms, and irrational allocation of resources, resulting in reforms of limited effectiveness. Eventually, in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Beiyang Naval Division was completely destroyed, the foreign affairs movement was declared a failure, and the process of reform in China came to stagnation. The limitations of the foreign affairs movement were that it failed to promote modernization and was limited to the military and technological levels, lacking deep-seated political institutional and social changes, and ultimately failed to reverse the gradual decline of the Qing dynasty.

2.4. Reform: Meiji Restoration of Japan

The Meiji Restoration was a comprehensive reform led by Emperor Meiji, driven by external shocks and the domestic movement to reverse the Shogunate, which succeeded in modernizing the country [10, 11]. In terms of political reform, Japan abolished feudal clans, established a centralized government, and promulgated the Constitution of the Empire of Japan in 1889, which established a

constitutional monarchy and laid the foundation of the modern state system. In terms of economic reforms, the government implemented land reforms to increase agricultural productivity, while vigorously developing industry, establishing a modern industrial system under state leadership, promoting the development of railroads, textiles, military industry and other fields, and the rapid rise of Zaibatsu such as Mitsui, which contributed to the growth of the capitalist economy. Militarily, followed the example of the West, learning from the army of Prussia and the navy of Britain, introducing conscription, and establishing a modernized army. Japan defeated the Qing dynasty in the Sino-Japanese War from 1894 to 1895 and Russia in the Russo-Japanese War from 1904 to 1905, and founded its regional hegemonic position in East Asia [8]. In addition, in terms of social and cultural reforms, Japan introduced compulsory national education to improve labor quality, while extensively absorbing western technology, administrative systems, thus laying the foundation for the country's competitiveness. The key to the success of the Meiji Restoration was its all-encompassing institutional changes covering political, economic, military and social fields, which enabled Japan to rapidly emerge as a modern power and successfully escape from the crisis of being semi-colonized.

3. Stagnation and Success: Long-Term Impacts of Reform

3.1. Failure of Qing Dynasty

The Self-Strengthening Movement was the forced reform under western pressures, implies a catching-up of the Qing. Although it made some progress in military, industrial and scientific technology, and promoted the transformation of Chinese society from traditional to modern, it ultimately failed to modernize the country due to the lack of political and social change and its blunted response to the crisis. The foreign affairs movement emphasized. It proved that the foreign affairs movement could only serve as a kind of psychological comfort for the Qing government in response to external pressures, focusing purely on the introduction of western technology and failing to change the feudal and authoritarian political system, resulting in a lack of continuity and depth of reform. The defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War marked the bankruptcy of the Qing government, and the total destruction of the Beiyang Naval Division exposed the weakness of China's military construction. After the defeat, the Qing Dynasty was forced to sign the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ceded Taiwan and the Pescadores and paid huge reparations to Japan, which further weakened China's economy and national sovereignty [4]. The ensuing Eight-Power Allied War against China and the Boxer Protocol further deepened the decline of the Qing Dynasty and turned China into a semi-colonized state [6]. At large, the failure of the Qing Dynasty stemmed from the limitations of its reforms, that it failed to reform its political system, to establish a market mechanism that could adapt to the modern economy, and to improve the overall quality of its society, which led to its continued decline in wars with the western powers and Japan. The process of modernization and state-building in China was interrupted.

3.2. Success of Meiji Restoration

In contrast to the failed reforms of the Qing Dynasty, Japan's Meiji Restoration, succeeded in modernizing the country and effecting far-reaching changes at several social levels. Politically, Japan abolished the feudal Shogunate system, established a centralized state system, and launched a constitutional monarchy through the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, which provided a stable framework for national governance [10]. The success of the reforms turned Japan into an energy-demanding country and provided the impetus for Japan's aggressive expansion. In the Sino-Japanese War, Japan gained land and fueled its industrial development through economic reparations. This was followed by another victory in the Russo-Japanese War, making it the first Asian country to defeat a European power and further establishing its hegemony in East Asia. This series of victories demonstrated that the Meiji Restoration not only freed Japan from the threat of colonialism and led to the rise of a nation and a significant increase in its sense of superiority, but also made it an aggressively expanding imperialist state.

3.3. Domestic Impact and Alternations

In the face of external threats, social instability was exacerbated by the rigid centralized rule of the Qing dynasty, a corrupt bureaucracy, a compromising diplomatic attitude and the failure of change. Consequently, the 1911 Xinhai Revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China, marking the end of feudalism in China. However, after the regime change, domestic politics remained in turmoil, with warlords and civil wars occurring frequently, causing further delays in China's modernization. On the contrary, in Japan, after the Meiji Restoration, the social order was gradually stabilized, and the government introduced compulsory education to improve the quality of the whole population, which led to a stronger sense of national identity among the citizens. At the same time, the government supported the development of enterprises and promoted industrialization, which led to the transformation of Japan's social structure and the gradual establishment of the capitalist economic system after the Shogunate [8,12]. Japan's success showed that a stable political system and social change were the key to national development, while the failure of the Qing dynasty proved that the mere importation of superficial technology could not bring about real modernization.

3.4. Changes in International Status

In terms of international status, the Qing Dynasty gradually lost its status as the “sovereign state of East Asia” due to repeated defeats, and became the target of division by the great powers. At the end of the 19th century, the Western powers divided their spheres of influence in China, and the Qing government's international influence continued to decline. At the same time, Japan not only established its hegemony in East Asia, but also gained more say in international affairs and became one of the Great Powers. In 1919, Japan participated in the Paris Peace Conference as a victorious country, and gained the privilege of Germany's presence in Shandong Province of China, thus further expanding its international influence. This shift in international status marked the collapse of the traditional order in East Asia, with Japan replacing China as the dominant power in the region.

4. Comparison

In the course of its early history, Japan was heavily influenced by Chinese culture and practiced Confucianism. However, the two countries differed greatly in their historical origins, economic power, territorial extent, and geographic features before Western intervention. Compared with Tokugawa, the Qing Dynasty had a longer and more entrenched centralization of power and a stronger economy. Therefore, in the face of external threats, it initially presented a strong meaning form of self-confidence and maintenance of upper-level sovereignty. The Qing dynasty was politically conservative, maintaining imperial autocracy and cultural superiority, which led to limited reforms and attempts to make only partial repairs based on the maintenance of the traditional framework. Japan, however, took the initiative to abolish the feudal system, establish centralized power, and establish a constitutional monarchy through its constitution, which made the government operate more efficiently. On the economic level, the Qing Dynasty's foreign affairs movement failed to establish a market economy, while Japan's government-led industrialization drove economic development, culminating in the formation of a strong capitalist economy and rapid growth in economic power. On the military level, although the Qing Dynasty established the Beiyang Naval Division, it eventually suffered a crushing defeat in the Sino-Japanese War due to financial mismanagement and technological backwardness. Japan, on the other hand, rapidly built up a modernized army by learning the Western military system and introducing conscription. It has been shown that external threats may have a more significant motivating and deterrent effect on the weaker groups. Japan's initiative in embracing Western civilization and its willingness to break away from the traditional power structure to make radical changes were key to the country's rise. The Qing dynasty, on the other hand, displayed an obvious defensive posture toward Western modernization, and its passive response not only led to repeated interruptions of China's modernization process, but also exacerbated the sense of national shame and social conflicts.

5. Conclusion

The choices for external threats to the state are either resistance or compromise. These decisions not only construct a new balance of power in East Asia but also sets the stage for the region's modern development. Therefore, these reflect that the difference in the responses of China and Japan to the western pressures of the 19th century was the result of the interaction of a number of factors. The essence lies in the ability to realize social transformation through top-down institutional restructuring. The competition between countries is extremely complex and requires comprehensive improvement of their own strength. Historical changes in East Asia have shown that the rise and fall of nations depends on their ability to respond to changes in the international environment in a timely manner, with the successful rise of Japan in the 19th century through the Meiji Restoration, and the failure of the Qing Dynasty, which plunged China into a long period of decline. In recent times, the development of East Asian countries has continued to be influenced by their historical legacies. For example, China has risen rapidly after reform and opening up, and Japan has once again become an economic powerhouse in its post-war reconstruction. Looking ahead, East Asian countries should pay more attention to institutional reform, scientific and technological innovation and regional cooperation to avoid a similar historical decline. At the same time, against the backdrop of globalization and intensified geopolitical competition, how East Asian countries balance economic development and political stability will determine the region's political evolution and international status in the 21st century.

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