CHAPTER 29 - MODERN EAST ASIA

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter surveys the impact of the Western world on China and Japan and discusses the manner in which each country responded to the challenges presented. Both countries relied on Confucianism to adjust to sociopolitical change and to develop strong national challenges to the West. In most other respects, however, Japan and China could hardly be more different in their historical development, given China's recurrent pattern of dynasties and Japan's pattern of feudal evolution.

China's modern century has been dominated not so much by technological or political progress, but by its encounter with the West. During the first phase of China's modern period, from the Opium War (1839-1842) to the fall of the Manchu dynasty (1911), China was little affected by the impact of the West. The second phase, from 1911 to the Communist revolution of 1949, was a time of turmoil and suffering. The chapter then surveys the origins and repercussions of the Opium War with Britain and emphasizes the Treaty of Nanking, the first of the "unequal treaties" that provided foreign powers with trade advantages that were exploitative in nature. A more immediate threat to Manchu rule than foreign gunboats and unequal treaties were a series of rebellions (Taiping, Nien and Muslim) that convulsed China between 1850 and 1873. The total loss of population due to these rebellions was over sixty million, a loss from which China did not recover until after 1911. Still the Manchu dynasty demonstrated resiliency and a capacity to rebuild after this unprecedented internal destruction. The most vital figures during these decades were a few impressive governor-generals who were loyal to the dynasty and in charge of two or three provinces. They sought Western military technology, organized agricultural production, social relief operations, and even began commercial ventures.

The chapter then concentrates on China's foreign relations with fringe lands inhabited by non-Chinese, but which China claimed by right of past conquest or as tributaries. In the northwest, China confronted imperial Russia and achieved a negotiated restoration of the Ili region in western Mongolia from Russian control. To the south, China saw Vietnam as a tributary that could be aided or punished as necessary. But French interests in Vietnam forced a two year war (1883-1885) that resulted in a Chinese defeat and the establishment of the Federation of Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) under French control. A third area of contention was Korea, which saw itself as a tributary of China. But in 1876, Japan "opened" Korea to international relations and fought a successful war for influence in the region that resulted in the acquisition of Taiwan as Japan's first colony.

By the early 1890s, well-being had generally been restored to China's late dynastic society. After China's defeat by Japan in 1895, a new wave of reform proposals were adopted, but proved ineffective as
foreign powers began "carving up the melon." The difficult suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 convinced even conservative Chinese leaders that change was necessary and a more powerful reform movement began that effected changes in the educational system, the military and bureaucracy. These changes sparked the 1911 revolution.

Sun Yat-sen, a republican revolutionary organized the Revolutionary Alliance in 1905 and became associated with the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) formed in 1912. The last Manchu emperor was deposed and after an internal power struggle, China entered a period of political chaos as warlords dominated various regions. Yet these were also years of intense intellectual ferment as demonstrated by the May Fourth Movement, which led students to demonstrate for a change in the complexion of Chinese thought. The period of warlord rule afforded a period of space between the intellectual constraints of the old dynasty and those of the nationalist and communist eras that would follow.

The text then relates the organization of the Kuomintang under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek and the clash between nationalist and communist forces under the control of Mao Tse-tung. With the communist victory in 1949, the feeling was widespread that China was once again in the hands of the Chinese.

The text continues by discussing events in Japan from 1853 to 1945. The seclusion of Japan from outside influence had been broken by Commodore Perry's arrival in 1853. This seclusion had been necessary for the preservation of the Tokugawa political mechanism and within fifteen years, the entire bakufu-domain system collapsed and a new group of unusually talented leaders seized power. After a series of internal wars that were brought to a close in 1868, Japan began assimilating Western culture and technology. The Meiji state (1868-1890) took the lead in this development. Their immediate goal was to centralize political power before traveling abroad in order to study the West. The Meiji leaders then stabilized government revenues and set about establishing political parties and a national assembly founded on Western models. The government actually viewed the party movement with distaste, but did not know how to counter it. The Meiji constitution was adapted from the Prussian model and was notable for the broad powers granted to the emperor. The intention was not to create a parliamentary system, but a constitutional system containing, as one of its parts, a parliament.

The change in domestic politics helped transform Japan into a world power. Early Meiji reforms unshackled the late Tokugawa economy as occupations were freed, barriers or roads abolished and commercial ventures encouraged. More food and better hygiene led to population growth and the government used the excess labor to develop Japan's industrial base. Politically, the years before and after the turn of the century represented the culmination of Meiji progress. Revision of the "unequal treaties" was obtained by getting rid of extraterritoriality (1899) and by regaining control of tariffs (1911). However, Japan gained recognition as a world power by defeating China in a war over conflicting
interests in Korea (1894-1895), by participating in the international force that relieved Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, by entering into the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902, and by defeating Russia in the war of 1904-1905. Japan wanted equality with the great Western powers, and this was to be obtained through war and colonial adventurism.

The chapter continues by tracing the development of Japan's parliamentary coalitions, especially during the period of strength in the mid-1920s. Within a decade, however, party leaders had lost the gains of thirty-five years and by 1945 Japan had been defeated in a devastating war, which resulted in foreign occupation for the first time in its history. The chapter concludes by detailing the rise of militarism and the economic and political events that led to the domination of the military and the leadership of Tojo and others, who carried Japan to war. Until the middle of 1942, Japanese victories were stunning, but the tide turned at the Battle of Midway. The nuclear attack on Japan in August, 1945 proved devastating and led to Japan's surrender.

KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. The Coming of Political Change in Modern East Asia: The arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853 immediately set in motion a political change in Japan that resulted in the collapse of the Tokugawa regime within fifteen years, and fostered the determination to build a modern state. By the turn of the century, Japan had defeated China and was about to defeat imperial Russia in a war. China, by contrast, weathered the Opium War (1839-1842) and looked toward its traditions that had so often maintained stability in the past. The strength of tradition was, paradoxically, China's weakness, for it took seventy years after the Opium War to overthrow the Manchu dynasty (1911). Only then was China able to begin the modernization that Japan had begun in 1868. That China in some sense "failed" during this modern century is not a Western view imposed on China; it was the view held by the Chinese themselves.

2. China's "Self-Strengthening" (1874-1895): The two decades after the suppression of China's internal rebellions from 1850-1873 have often been termed a period of "self-strengthening." Indeed, the Chinese demonstrated a resiliency and capacity to rebuild after this unprecedented destruction. The Manchu dynasty was able to maintain or regain some territories while losing others. Thus, if we compare this period with the late Sung or late Ming dynasties, the last decades of the nineteenth century look good. But the term "self-strengthening" is somewhat misleading when one compares China with the relative power of Japan or with the
technologically advanced European nations. The firepower of Western naval forces doubled each decade. Consequently, the states China faced at the end of the century were vastly more formidable than those of the Opium War. Despite self-strengthening, China was relatively weaker at the end of the period than at the start.
3. **The Politics of Imperial Japan:** Parliaments began in the West and have generally worked better there than in any other parts of the world. For Japan to establish a constitution during the nineteenth century was a bold experiment and most Western observers were skeptical of its chances for success. How should we now, with some hindsight in the late twentieth century, view the Japanese political experience? Some have argued that Japanese society was simply not ready for constitutional government and consequently the militarism of the thirties was inevitable. From the perspective of an ideal democracy, Japan had many weaknesses: a small middle class, weak trade unions, an independent military under the emperor, a strong emperor-centered nationalism and so on. But these weaknesses, other historians note, did not prevent the Diet from growing in importance. The transfer fell short of full parliamentary government, but had it not been derailed by the Great Depression and other events, the advance toward parliamentary government might have continued.

4. **Japanese Militarism and German Nazism:** The move to fascist governments in Japan and Germany has evoked many comparisons. Both countries had shallowly rooted parliamentary systems, both were stricken by the Great Depression and sought solutions in territorial expansion, both persecuted socialists and then liberals, both were modern enough to establish the military service schools and communication systems to implement authoritarian regimes, while they were not firmly enough based in democratic values to resist anti-parliamentary forces. But the differences between Japan and Germany were also striking. Japan was more homogeneous and had no Catholic-Protestant split, no powerful Junker class, nor was its socialist movement a serious contender for political power. The political process during the 1930s was also different as the Nazis gained power through election after the Great Depression and inflation had destroyed the middle class and centrist parties. But in Japan, control of the government was taken away from Seiyukai and Minseito parties even while they continued to win elections. Japan did not suffer from inflation and its middle class was not hurt by the Depression. Finally, the process by which the two parties went to war was also different. In Germany, the Nazis rose as a mass party, created a totalitarian state and then made war. The authority of the party lasted until Hitler's death. But in Japan, there was neither a mass party nor a single group of leaders in control of the government. And it was not the totalitarian state that made war as much as it was war that made the state totalitarian.
5. **Modern East Asia in World Perspective:** From the late nineteenth century, all countries have wanted to be modern. They have wanted the material well-being that science and industry can produce, and also the military power and security that goes with it. Yet non-Western nations have not wanted to forsake their cultural identities and became Western. The problem therefore, has been to separate what was modern, from what was merely Western. In China, many of the preconditions for modernization had existed for years: a high level of literacy, a belief in the value of education, nationalism, a family system adaptive to small enterprises, and a market economy. Still, China did not open itself to Western ideas until the early decades of the twentieth century. In Japan by contrast, the society opened itself readily after 1868 to Western ideas and institutions, while still preserving the indigenous values of the culture. In fact, this process might be called indigenization, whereby a borrowed idea or institution became modified to better fit Japanese culture. During this period, the communist vision of Karl Marx was instituted with modifications in societies of the West and East. Marx had predicted that Socialist revolutions would break out in advanced economies where the contradictions of capitalism were sharpest. Lenin shifted the emphasis from spontaneous revolutions to the disciplined revolutionary party as vanguard of the proletariat, thereby changing the emphasis of communism to a movement best able to seize power in backward nations. Mao went further by admitting progressive peasants to the proletariat and by emphasizing political organization and indoctrination of the rural masses in the absence of an industrial proletariat.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*The Boxer Rebellion.* Films Library Holder. 21 min.

*Battle of China.* Films Library Holder. 64 min.

*China: A Revolution Revisited.* Films Inc. 83 min.

*China: An Open Door? Part 2 - The Past is Prologue.* Associated Press. 20 min.


China:  1932-1945.  CBA.  30 min.


Chinese History, No. 12 - China:  Coming of the West.  Teaching Films Custodians.  20 min.


The Emperor and a General.  Teaching Films Custodians.  29 min.

Imperial Sunset.  National Film Board of Canada.  18 min.

Imperialism and European Expansion.  Coronet Div.  13 min.

Mao vs. Chiang.  Films Inc.  25 min.

Japan:  A New Dawn over Asia.  Wolper Productions.  52 min.


Japan:  Century of Imperialism (1850-1945).  Metro Media Producers Inc.  29 min.

Japan Invades China -- Crises in the Far East.  Alan Landsburg Productions.  26 min.
The Japanese Perimeter. CBS. 27 min.

Battle of Midway. USN. 17 min.

Ordeal in Burma. Teaching Films Custodians. 27 min.

Pearl Harbor. Fox Movietone News. 9 min.

Fury in the Pacific. U.S. Office of War Information. 20 min.

The World at War: 6 - Bonzai: Japan 1931-1942. Thames Television. 51 min.

The World at War: 14 - It's a Lovely Day Tomorrow - Burma, 1942-1944. Thames Television. 50 min.

The World at War: 22 - Japan - 1941-1945. Thames Television. 51 min.