

The unequal treaties provoke in china history essay



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By the early 19th century, the growing imperialist ambition of the West began to act as a driving force to seek political and economic interest overseas. The isolated Far East was therefore seen as the perfect territory to secure trading privileges and extend western influences. China, Japan and Korea unfortunately became the victims under the semi-colonial, unequal treaty system, which provoked extreme responses in the countries in terms of three stages — rebellion, reform and revolution. In order to understanding the causes

In the 19th century, China suffered from the ancient twin evils of “ internal disorder and external aggression”.[1]Anti-Qing sentiment ran high while Western imperialists started to expand their influence in China. The Treaty of Nanking was the first unequal treaty signed, followed by the Treaty of Tianjin after China’s defeat in the 2nd Opium war. This resulted in the opening of five ports to British residence and trade, agreeing on fair tariff and allowing British to enjoy extraterritorial rights, which was seen as a threat to the Chinese sovereignty. The Chinese were deeply resented about the incapability of the Qing government in preventing foreign invasion and believed they had lost the Mandate of Heaven. Public indignation together with unstable social situation at grassroots, which caused by natural disasters and scarcity of resources, produced widespread unrest, especially in the South. This eventually led to the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64), following by the Nien (1853-68) and Moslem Rebellion (1855-73). The rebels aimed at destroying the Manchu and establishing the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. However, their hope was shattered when they were defeated by the

combined force of imperial army, which assisted by the British and French force.

The Taiping rebellion was a few civil uprising in the mid-19th century that had successfully threatened the Qing Dynasty. The success in modernising the Qing army and the superior military power of the West made the government realised the importance in strengthening its military force to suppress insurgence in the future. This had also forced the Qing to engage more in western technology and ideology, eventually leading to large scale reform movements, such as the self-strengthening movement later on. The rebellion also had an impact in a greater context of Chinese history. After the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, China was quickly fractured into kingdoms which were ruled by local warlords. Most of these warlords were the direct political descendants of the powerful regional commanders who fought against the Taipings in the 1850s.

After witnessing the destructiveness of the rebellion movements, the Qing government realised that only military advancement could help solve China's domestic disorder and foreign aggression. Hence, westernisation was seen as the ultimate solution. Inspired by the success of Meiji Restoration in Japan, the Self-Strengthening movement marked the start of industrialisation, resulting in the rise of middle and entrepreneurial class in China. However, it was proved to be an utter failure by the defeat in the Sino-Japanese War. Historians Craig, Fairbank and Reischauer (Craig, et al.) criticised the movement as " more defensive than creative, a conservative compromise avoiding genuine modernisation".[2]The movement failed due to limited vision of government. The reforms were superficial and the government

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merely attempted to adopt Western philosophy, institution and culture.

[3]Moreover, Confucianism played an important role in hindering modernisation progress as it conflicted with the idea of westernisation . The government's belief in " Chinese learning for the essential principles, Western learning for the practical applications" was misleading.[4]It had completely overlooked the fact that a modern administrative and economic system was also needed in restoring its power. Furthermore, Chinese persistence in traditional patterns made them reluctant to western innovations , as Craig et al. asserted that, " Chinese society was so distinctively constituted hat it could not follow Western models of organisation.[5]Traditional thinking and conservatism were evident among reform officials, impeding policy making progress.

The self-strengthening movement has been regarded as " an early manifestation of anti-imperialist nationalism",[6]it had great impacts on China not only in the late 19th century but also the early 20th century before the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. The failure of the movement led to a vacuum at court which was quickly filled by new reformists Liang Qi-chao and Kang You-wei, who were the leaders of the Hundred Days' Reform (1898). It was again, a failure due to severe opposition from the conservatives and Empress Dowager. They believed driving the westerners out was the only way forward, thus, leading to a rise of anti-imperialist sentiment in the Boxer Uprising (1898). The boxers' eventual failure was significant because it reflected the superiority of Western military and demonstrated the inability of the government in managing foreign aggression. Most importantly, social hopelessness and anti-Qing feelings

drove the regime into constructive action to save itself, while revolutionary movement gradually grew underground. Revolutionaries, like Sun Yat Sen believed that revolution was the only way to save the nation from foreign imperialism. This eventually led to the 1911 revolution and marked the end of China 5000 years of monarchy era.

Japan was the only large Asian country to remain isolated to the Western world since 1639. Similar to China, the western powers, who stimulated by rapid industrialisation growth, were eager to expand their trade in Japan. America was the first country to challenge Japan's seclusion in 1853 by sailing two navy steamships under the command of Commodore Perry. The first treaty — the Treaty of Kanagawa was signed in 1854, which brought Japan's self-isolation policy to an end. Other unequal treaties were imposed on Japan by Britain, Russia and France later on to seek economic privileges.

Under the Tokugawa dictatorship, Japan adopted the policy of vacillation and procrastination immediately after signing the treaties as it believed that " so long as the foreigners be kept isolated and out of sight of the people, there was a possibility that the autocratic authority of the Shogun would not be challenged." [7] Different interpretation and misunderstanding on the matters of trade and the US Consul General's right in Japan were resulted. Moreover, the US Consul General Townsend Harris received no definitive reply from the Shogun's government after ten months on whether he was permitted to enter the capital. Hugh Borton pointed out that it was a smart move of the Japanese because " While it had been necessary to sign treaties with the Western powers, such action had not seriously threatened the power or prestige of the government" [8]

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On the other hand, anti-foreign extremist could not stand and see their Japanese soil violated by the foreign barbarians, hoping to expel them forcefully. The continuous threats caused almost all foreign representatives to leave Eto temporarily, except Townsend Harris.

Tokugawa Shogun lose its influence in 1868 after the Japanese Civil War and the emperor was restored to the superior position. Meanwhile, the Meiji Emperor confronted with many domestic problems. These issues alarmed the Emperor and underlined his belief that “ Japan could only be saved from the restrictive and stifling influences of its old tradition by concentrating on Western techniques and by understanding certain basic laws and principles”. [9]Consequently, the newly constituted imperial government implemented the Meiji Restoration, hoping to achieve the aim Fukoku Kyohei (rich country, strong army) through rapid modernisation and industrialisation.

Large scale reforms were carried out in foreign relations, military, finance, and many other fields, in which the most important achievements were the abolition of feudalism, old class structure and the set up of the Meiji Constitution in 1889. By 1890, Japan was in an advantageous position in terms of industrial growth, technological advancement and military strengths. Such rapid industrialisation had gained the acknowledgement from the West, with the unequal treaties being revised in 1894.

The Meiji Restoration played an indispensable role in Japanese history and was undoubtedly, a tremendous success. It had boosted the confidence of the nation and laid the root of Japanese Imperialism. The ideas of nationalism and expansionism were further enhanced by its victory in the Sino-Japanese

War (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), which Japan had achieved dominance over Korea and eventually established colonial control all over Asia in the next two decades as Borton commented, "Japan seemed to have been catapulted to the world stage by an uncontrollable and compelling urge to become strong, to force its will on any who challenged its position, and to be the leader of Asia".[10]

Korea, which was known as the "hermit kingdom" had always been adopted Isolationism and remained close to the West. Yet, its seclusion was gradually destroyed under the pressure of Japan and the western powers in the mid 19th century. The Treaty of Kanghwa as signed between Korea and Japan in 1876, which gave extraterritorial right to the Japanese in Korea and led to the open of three treaty ports, marking the start of Japanese penetration of the country. The success in establishing diplomatic relations with Korea made the west even more anxious to open Korea by negotiating similar treaties.

Although the Koreans feared western domination, they were impressed by impressed by Western advanced technology and systems. They believed modernisation was the only way to enhance everyday life and promote national strength. The Progressive Movement was carried out from 1873-95, aiming to establish an unquestioned national independence by making Korea free from Chinese interference and preserve independence.[11]Undeniably, the reforms resulted in progression and westernisation of nearly all aspects of the nation. Yet, Korean historian HanWoo-Keun criticised the reforms were carried out "not only carelessly and in haste but with complete disregard for the feelings and even the welfare of those whom thy most affected".[12]In <https://assignbuster.com/the-unequal-treaties-provoke-in-china-history-essay/>

contrast, peasants and working class were deeply resented about the worsening socio-economic conditions under the unequal treaty. Inequities of tax system and corruptions of regional officials further exacerbated grievances of the Tonghak. The rebels demanded “ reform at home, expulsion of Westerners and Japanese and an end to relations with foreign nations”,^[13]which led to the Tonghak Revolt in 1894. Yet, the rebels overlooked the fact their demand and actions would involve Korea in a disastrous war.^[14]The revolt was considered as the first step of Korea losing its national independence. To Japan, Korea’s military reliance on China in oppressing the revolt was a great opportunity to remove Chinese control in Korea while monitor Russia’s influence in the region. China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War had therefore symbolised Japan complete domination over Korea. Meanwhile, the Koreans, according to Han Woo-Keun had “ at last begun to develop a true national consciousness the first prerequisite for the building of a modern state”.^[15]Despite continuous attempts to modernise the nation, the fate of Korea seemed to have sealed when it signed the Treaty of Kanghwa. The rising of Japan as an imperial power and Korea’s over-reliance on China had ultimately made its loss of sovereignty inevitable.

The history of China, Japan and Korea have shown us that although they had been similarly challenged by foreign aggression and the disadvantageous unequal treaties, their responses and the consequences of the responses were very different. For instance, modernisation was a major aspect of these nations response to the foreign encroachment. The progress of reforms and westernisation varied as they were very much dependent on whether the

people were open-minded and flexible to adopt the sudden transformation of society. It also hinged on the structural stability of traditional civilization and values of the country, not to mention the capacity of government to react. The result of the modernisation movements had therefore, manifest the destiny of each country.