

# The chinese defeat in the sino-japanese war of 1894-5

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The Sino-Japanese War (SJW) was fought between China and Japan over the strategic importance of Korea. The war broke out after Japanese troops, which had been sent to crush the 1894 Tong Hak Rebellion, refused to leave despite being obliged to do so by the 1885 Li-Ito Convention. The SJW ended in a swift defeat of China and symbolized the degeneration of the Qing Dynasty (QD, 1644-1911). It also showed how successful Japan's modernization was since the Meiji Restoration (MR, 1868-1925) compared with the Self-Strengthening Movement (SSM) of China. Besides the problems inherent in the SSM, the Chinese were "doomed to failure" due to lack of coordination and foresight, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, the SSM, which aimed to "learn the superior technique of the barbarians to control the barbarians" <sup>1</sup>, was a disappointment. However, Japan's reason for modernization during the MR was to strive to be on an equal footing as the West, which was sadly, not China's goal. The SSM was only to control the foreigners, not to create an Industrial Revolution for China, unlike what Japan did. Therefore, this meant China had a higher probability of losing.

Unlike Japan's reforms, which received the Emperor's ratification, the conservative and xenophobic QD frowned upon the SSM, because it feared that if people learnt about Western democratic principles, the Confucian philosophy of loyalty to the Emperor would fade and undermine the QD's authority. Without any imperial support, the SSM could not take off, because the court would be uncoordinated because of difference of opinions. Hence, the SSM ostensibly tried to modernize China, but was stifled by the court's

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refusal to discard its philosophy to embrace Western influence. Instead of remaking China into a modern state, the Qing court underwent a period of "Tung Chih Restoration" to rejuvenate the traditional Confucianist order in China.

In addition, the Chinese had this notion of "Chinese learning as essence, western learning for application" 2. They hanged on to the past & resisted fundamental changes. This persistence of conservative attitudes was also detrimental in limiting the scope of reform in China. The SSM was overly focused on the military and its related industries. The Chinese still maintained a superior mentality, thought they were the greatest civilization in the world, and therefore rejected some important reforms in the area of culture and political institutions. This showed that the Chinese attempts at modernization was only superficial and backward.

Japan, however, was more open to changes. The Emperor was radical and shrewd to discard any culture which obstructed modernization. Japan picked up the cue where China did not. In addition, the Japanese Restoration leaders were hardheaded, practical men whose creed was summed up in the phrase 'rich country, strong arms'<sup>3</sup>. They understood that the strength of the West lay in its industrial and military establishments<sup>4</sup>. Hence, Japan's weaponry and army was more developed than China's, enhancing its chances of winning the SJW.

Since the very basis of China's self-strengthening was to strengthen the existing order rather than to replace it<sup>5</sup>, it was not surprising that the reform movement failed and China remained weak. In contrast, Emperor Mutsihito's

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Charter Oath was clear-cut in his plans for Japan's modernization, with statements like 'base customs of former times would be abandoned'<sup>6</sup> and that in the pursuit of national strength 'knowledge shall be sought throughout the world'<sup>7</sup>. As it happened, the MR was more comprehensive than the SSM in terms of the areas of reforms, i. e. military, education, communications, industrialization, judicial and administrative changes.

The SSM also failed due to an uncoordinated effort. It was basically individual enterprise on the part of the viceroys, who used their arsenals as power bases. If different provinces modernized at differing paces, the movement would have failed definitely, because modernization should have applied to the whole of China, not selected provinces. On the other hand, the MR succeeded because it was a national effort. The government stressed 'enrich the country, strengthen the military'<sup>8</sup>. Thus, chances of success were better, because everyone, especially the oligarchy of the Choshu and Satsuma clans, were united in their aim to make Japan a modern country.

On top of the problem discussed above, there was the presence of an inefficient and conservative bureaucracy in China. The Chinese officials despised the merchants and tried to remove them from posts in the industries. This was unwise as the merchants were rich and were most able to provide the capital needed for the SSM. The government, instead of trying to get rid of them, should actually try to attract them into these industries. Moreover, instead of protecting its budding industry, the government taxed the most dynamic enterprises heavily. As a result of this heavy taxation, after a long period of initial success, most of these new enterprises would

lose its economic competitiveness. From this, we can thus see that undergoing industrialization did not help China very much.

In contrast, Japan sought to industrialize herself to ensure a sound economic base. The government became a large-scale patron of new businesses, supporting them financially. Heavy industries like steel and iron became strategic, contributing to the building up for her own navy. The excess was exported for revenue. Industrialization became a huge success for it also contributed to the success of the other areas of modernization like military. Also, the revenue brought about by exporting her own goods gave the government a sound financial base and increased the people's confidence in it.

The SSM also failed due to a lack of capital. With increasing foreign imperialism, i. e. the Opium Wars, China found herself paying indemnities to the Western imperialists, even though she did not start the wars. Thus, she could not afford a wide scope of reforms even if she wanted to. However, by compensating the daimyos for their loss of lands, Japan ensured she could afford a wide range of reforms, since the compensation would have given the daimyos capital to invest in new firms which centred on making weapons.

Secondly, the Peiyang Fleet of Viceroy Li Hung Chang was unprepared for war. The abuse of power and corruption at court enabled the embezzlement of public funds by his own naval and army officers. Also, the Empress Dowager squandered away the naval funds for building the Summer Palace. This would only led to a severe drain of funds which could be used to modernize the army more effectively. This doomed the Chinese effort from

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the start. In fact, many of the Chinese guns were allocated the wrong size shells and the shells were loaded with sand instead of gunpowder<sup>9</sup>. For all its outward brilliance- the newly painted ships and the neatly uniformed officers- the Peiyang was a comic opera fleet good only for cruising the harbors, not fighting a modern war<sup>10</sup>. Thus, under such conditions, the fleet would not even stand a chance of victory because it lacked ammunition.

In contrast, Japan succeeded in modernizing her army through developing official positions, military academies, training and national conscription. Unlike China, Japanese military methods were modern, and their training and degree of specialization were thoroughly professional. Part of the efficiency in the Japanese army was due to the decision taken in 1878 to create an Army General Staff based on the German model<sup>11</sup>. Also, Japan ensured its warships and weaponry were up to Western standards, by employing a German adviser, Klemens Meckel, who could also teach the Japanese how to operate the machinery<sup>12</sup>. Japan ensured that she could be self-sufficient, increasing her chances of winning the SJW. With regards to Japan's military, China only pales in comparison. Hence, a defeat of China was inevitable.

Thirdly, China lacked coordination and the needed essence of national unity. The fleets of other viceroys refused to help due to their vested interests. If Japan's victory was a concerted effort of its army and navy, then China's was not. Already, the Peiyang Fleet was unfit for battle; now with no fleets offering any assistance to Li, he would be greatly outnumbered- China's defeat was imminent.

For Japan, on the other hand, the war was seen as a national effort. There was none of the divisiveness evident in China. The whole Japanese army was mobilized as compared to only Li's northern army and navy. Moreover, in Japan, popular support was given psychological intensity by Shintoism. While Japan went to war as a strongly unified and modern state, China entered the war with no unity even between the different military commanders.

Lastly, China's inevitable defeat in the war could also be attributed to the fact that direction from the central bureaucracy was weak. There was no clear demarcation of authority. Li did not have the authority to do things according to his will and he could not mobilize support from the ships and troops outside his Peiyang command and Huai army.

In contrast to China's lack of a strong, central authority, Japan had stable political leadership after the Meiji Restoration by 1894. She had established a modern constitutional structure that enabled the oligarchy to maintain a generally autocratic control over policy. This oligarchy formed a highly centralized bureaucracy which provided Japan with the government capable of marshalling its resources at any time.

In conclusion, the failure of the SSM and the overwhelming success of Japan's modernization were crucial in China's defeat, because it showed the disparity between the Peiyang Fleet as compared to Japan's more advanced army and navy. It was inevitable that the Chinese lost the SJW because her fleet was incompetent and unprepared for battle. National unity was lacked of in Chinese society. However, in the Japanese society, everything was seen

as a national effort. Without ample support, a defeat would be rather unavoidable.

Lack of central authority aggravated China's already-losing battle. Li could not mobilize support or do things according to his will. By the end of the SJW, the fact that China lacked essential modernization efforts became clear. She was even unable to defeat such a smaller nation as compared to herself. China was thrown into an "era of humiliation" as she was sliced off and partitioned to the different foreign powers.