# A Brief Comparative Study of the Imperial Crises of China and Japan from the Eighteenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Centuries

## Arka CHAKRABORTY[1]

*[1]Presidency University, Kolkata, India*
arkac910@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT**: Empire' in the traditional sense was present throughout most of human history arguably until the emergence of the 'nation-state' structure in the past century and 'Imperialism' persists even to this day. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were characterized by the breakdown of one kind of imperial authority almost all over the world and the advent of a new kind of one. Such was the case in the Qing empire (1644-1911 AD) of China and the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1868 AD) of Japan, both of which experienced the downfall of the existing power structure. The imperial crises that these two states went through were similar in some ways and distinctly different in other ways. This paper attempts to present a brief sketch of the two narratives and then compare them in order to form a better understanding of the circumstances and processes which led to and accompanied these unique experiences of the nineteenth-century Far East.

**KEYWORDS:** Empire, Imperial Crises, China,  Japan**,**   Eighteenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Centuries

## Introduction:

The word 'Empire' generally implies a territorially large state comprised of diverse ethno-religious, linguistic and social groups controlled by one ruling elite who try to co-ordinate these diverse populations to effectively accumulate and manage resources. Therefore, 'Imperial crisis', in simplest sense of the term, means a failure to manage subject populations and the loss of control over sources of income, leading, sometimes, to the transfer of authority to another ruling minority or division of authority among multiple ruling classes. If observed from this perspective, all the imperial crises in world history seem to be more or less the same. If,

however, the geo-political and socio-economic contexts, processes and agents are taken into account, the crises of different empires tend to be unique entities. The Qing empire mainly based on China and the Tokugawa shogunate of Japan are no exceptions. Both, in the nineteenth century, failed to maintain control over their diverse subject populations and to use the human and material resource pool to its full potential to effectively respond to new challenges. On the other hand, if the deep-rooted problems that culminated in this situation, factors that were at play and outcomes of the two experiences are taken into account, two drastically different pictures are likely to be found. A brief survey of both the 'crisis' situations in the Qing and Tokugawa states are required before such a comparison can be attempted.

**The Chinese case: The Qing Crisis:**
The Manchus were a pastoral nomadic group based north of China (now Manchuria), although by seventeenth century some had settled as agriculturalists in southern Manchuria. They constantly fought with other groups and among themselves for the control of lands in southern Manchuria and northern China. An ambitious chief Nurhaci (reigned 1616-1626 AD) united the Manchus into a centralized state which quickly took control of Korea and Mongolia. When a rebel group captured the Ming capital Peking (now Beijing), the Manchus entered China proper on the pretext of helping a Ming loyalist group to re-capture the capital, but finally took control of it themselves (1644 AD). Thus the Manchu rulers became rulers of China: the Oing (meaning "pure") dynasty. By the 1680s, the Qing defeated the Ming loyalists and finished conquering what was the Ming empire.[1] As the Qing were not Han Chinese they were experienced in tribal politics and military and were able to control more territory and diverse peoples than the Ming could. The new overlords of China also carefully maintained their ethnic identity and forced the Chinese subject populations to grow and maintain pigtails as a sign of subordination. Even so, the Manchus adopted Chinese mechanisms to establish their legitimacy (ex: presenting the emperor as 'The Son of Heaven' who is bestowed with divine rights to

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[1] Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Ziegler, *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000), pp. 212

maintain order) and continued the Civil Service Examination system to select those with merit as scholar-bureaucrats. In short, the Qing were recognizably 'Chinese' ruling elite, but with a different socio-ethnic background. Qing rule saw an era of peace, stability and prosperity, with growing population, production and commerce. However, some **deep-rooted structural problems** as well as the imperial authority's inability to adapt to the changing circumstances caused the Qing ruling elite to encounter challenges they could not overcome later on.

The Qings' disasters in the nineteenth century had their roots in the eighteenth century. Firstly, a long period of internal peace and economic growth led to a sharp population rise; from about 150 million in the mid-seventeenth century to around 450 million in the mid-nineteenth century, most of whom migrated to less populated areas to exploit new cultivable land; a process that almost reached its saturation point by the nineteenth century. However, the size of the administrative body remained almost the same through these centuries and the occupation-colour of the countryside remained the same (mostly cultivation). Thus, according to Susan Mann Jones, there was an absence of new kinds of economic and political growth to absorb this population. This deficit led to most of China's political, economic and social problems.[2] Secondly, bureaucrats were discouraged from taking any innovative decisions. Although this centralized power in the emperors' hands, the bureaucracy's problem-solving potential was severely inhibited, making political stability more dependant on the emperor's personal ability.[3] Thirdly, the rapid growth of an urban literate population and the relative stagnation in terms of the size of the bureaucracy led to a fierce competition for bureaucratic positions, encouraging bribery, patronage networks and other illegal channels to a job. Widespread unemployment of young literate men which led to a proliferation in the number of clerks, errand-runners and other such petty workers under official bureaucratic personnel. Members of the patronage networks had to pay tribute to their superiors and take

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[2] Susan Mann Jones, "Dynastic Decline and Roots of Rebellion," in Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China* vol. 10, part 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978) pp. 107-162

[3] Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1970) pp. 123-124

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care of the needs of their large entourages even before attending to their own financial needs, leading to a far higher amount of tax-collection than what was stipulated for the imperial treasury which was indirectly encouraged by the Qing taxation system itself. With the agricultural growth coming to an end by the late eighteenth century, the increasing demand for taxes became unbearable for the peasantry, leading to a number of tax rebellions. The epitome of Chinese bureaucratic corruption was embodied by Ho-shan, a favourite of the emperor Qianlong who had, by various means, accumulated a staggering 800 million taels within a span of 25 years. Even after his elimination, emperor Jiaqing (1795-1820 AD) was not able to uproot the patronage network he had created.[4]Fourthly, due to a flawed government policy of privilege distribution, the bannermen who were the Qings' elite military force in the early years had become land-owners with little martial prowess. The Chinese Green Standard Army had also become incompetent and corrupt. For example, most of the imperial funding to quell the White Lotus rebellion (1793-1804 AD) went into the generals' private coffers. Fifthly, the extravagant practices of the emperors strained the royal treasury. For instance, emperor Qianlong's Ten Perfect Accomplishments cost the empire 120 million taels.[5]Sixthly, The Qings could not suppress some secret societies like the Heaven and Earth Society, the Ko-Ho Brotherhood Association and the White Lotus sect which had a mixed religio-political organization and aimed at the restoration of the Ming order. They used public sentiment to orchestrate rebellions at every pretext, the most devastating being the White Lotus Rebellion.[6] Seventhly, the Qings' careful preservation of their ethnic identity and the Manchu ruling elite's lack of connections with Chinese society at large meant that they could be easily alienated by the population. Lastly, the Chinese imperial self-imagination as the Middle Kingdom on Earth led to many policy decisions on the part of the Qings which were totally incompatible with the increasingly connected world, where even non-Asian powers could effectively participate in East Asian politico-economic systems.

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[4] Jones, "Dynastic Decline and Roots of Rebellion," pp. 107-162
[5] Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, pp. 124-127
[6] Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, pp. 127-129

The deep-rooted social, economic and political problems listed above started from around mid-eighteenth century and played out completely on the nineteenth century when the Qing regime was faced with the threat of increasingly intrusive and state-supported European traders.

In 1757 AD, the Qing government came up with the policy of containing all foreign trade activity in the port of Canton  (now Guangzhou) situated in south-eastern China  (which was legalized in 1759 AD) to prevent them from getting too deep into the Middle Kingdom and to keep a close watch on them from the forts of Whampoa and Bogue. This marked the beginning of **a one-port trading system** that lasted until 1842 AD. Important characteristics of this system were, as follows:

(i) a series of functional and behavorial regulations were imposed on the foreign merchants preventing them from- (a) conducting trade through any entity other than the 'Co-hong' (a guildof 13 merchant organizations who were granted the monopoly to deal with foreign traders), (b) communicating with the government officials except the proper channel through the hong merchants, (c) bringing in foreign women or firearms, (d) sailing their ships through Bogue, (e) sailing their ships to anywhere but Whampoa, (f) moving in and out of their factories (storehouses compulsorily situated outside the city on the bank of the Pearl river) too frequently and walking freely outside a 100-meter radius of their factories, (g) staying in Canton after the end of the trading season, (h) employing any maid and more than 8 Chinese male servants, (i) buying Chinese books or learning Chinese etc.[7]

(ii) In spite of the participation of a number of foreign companies, the English East India Company dominated the Canton trade who also allowed private English ventures by granting charters to private ships to sail from India to China under the Company's license. This was known as the 'country trade' and accounted for almost 30 per cent of the total British trade in Canton.[8]

(iii) According to scholar Frederig Wakeman Jr., the Canton system was one of hierarchic subordination, first of the foreign traders to the Chinese trade monopolists collectively known as the Co-hong and second, of the Co-hong to the imperially appointed superintendent of maritime customs

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[7] Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, pp. 150-151
[8] Ibid, p. 143

known as the Hoppo. This hierarchy bred corruption from the top. The Hoppo was instructed to deliver 8550000 taels from the collected duties to the imperial family's personal treasury. The emperor's personal gain was the empire's public loss. The Hoppo and other officials also filled their personal coffers by exacting more money from the hong traders, which in turn pressurized the latter to acquire more money from the foreigners through various means.[9]

The Qing government insisted that the foreigners in China be judged according to the Chinese laws, but the 'strange' functioning of the Chinese judiciary and their harsh punishments created a sense of insecurity among the European residents in China. The infamous 'Lady Hughes' incident (November 24, 1784) led to a skyrocketing of this dissatisfaction and insecurity making the British government (London) dispatch diplomatic missions to widen trade, lessen the abuses in Canton and place the British and the Chinese on a regular diplomatic footing through direct contact with the central power in Peking. The MacArtney mission (1793 AD) and the Amharst mission (1816 AD) that cost the British government thousands of pounds were complete failures due to the Qing government's inflexible attitude.[10]

Meanwhile, lack of Chinese demand for any foreign products and the increasing demand of Chinese tea and silk in the West and the resultant silver drain drove the British to participate in the **illegal opium supply to China**.[11]

According to The Little Oxford English Dictionary, 'opium'  is 'an addictive drug made from the juice of a poppy'.Although it was used in ancient China as a medicine, the smoking of opium mixed with tobacco for pleasure began around the 1620s and by 1700 AD had spread across most of China irrespective of socio-economic standing. The emperor Yongzheng had banned the smoking and buying of opium in 1729 AD

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[9] Frederig Wakeman, "The Canton Trade and The Opium War," in Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China* vol. 10, part 1, (New Yrok: Cambridge University Press, 1978) pp. 163-212

[10] Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, pp. 153-166

[11] Peter C. Perdue, "Late Imperial China," in Philippa Levine and John Marriiott, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Modern Imperial Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2012) pp. 99-126

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and his successor emperor Qanlong had prohibited the cultivation and importation of opium in China in 1796 AD. Meanwhile, the British East India Company had established a monopoly over opium cultivation and manufacture in South Asia.[12]Realizing that opium was a product that actually had an illegal but massive demand in China, the Company started shipping opium via country traders to the Chinese coast where it was bought by Chinese opium-dealing organizations(*yao-k'ao*) in cash, by-passing the hong merchants.[13]The end of the East India Company's India monopoly in 1813 AD and China monopoly in 1834 AD led to a fierce competition among new English entrepreneurs supplying even more opium into China. By the 1830s, opium trade had started an increasing annual outflow of silver from China (an estimated 10 million taels from 1831 to 1833 AD) which led to a sharp increase in its value and, due to the monetized nature of China's taxation system, almost doubled the amount of tax to be paid by the peasants, creating the pretext for possible tax rebellions. Moreover, the dangerously Increasing number of opium addicts coincided with the decrease in human resource efficiency.[14]Finally in 1839 AD the imperial court sent an official Lin Zexu to Canton to stop the opium trade. Zexu destroyed a full year's opium supply in front of the foreign factories and executed some Chinese opium dealers. This led to a clamour for recompense by British merchants and, eventually, to the Anglo-Chinese war (1839-1842 AD) which China lost due to its military backwardness.[15]The Treaty of Nanking (1842 AD) that followed was, unlike most international treaties, completely one-sided where the Chinese delegates' opinions were completely ignored. The conditions were, as follows: (i) an indemnity of $ 21000000 to be paid in installments, (ii) the opening to trade of five ports: Canton, Shanghai, Amoy, Foochow and Ningpo, (iii) equal interaction between officials of corresponding ranks, (iv) British consuls at each port, (v) abolition of the Co-hong monopoly, (vi) a uniformly moderate fixed tariff to be imposed on both imports and exports and (vii)

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[12] Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, pp. 168-169
[13] Perdue, "Late Imperial China," pp. 99-126
[14] Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, pp. 168-172
[15] Perdue, "Late Imperial China," pp. 99-126

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cession of the island of Hong Kong to the British territory.[16] Representatives from the United States of America and France soon approached China with similar demands and the urge to avoid another military conflict and other strategic considerations made the Qing authorities comply, leading to the Treaties of Wanghia with the U.S (July 3, 1844) and Whampoa with France (October 24, 1844 AD), the former specifying extraterritoriality, most-favoured-nation treatment, the right to maintain churches and hospitals in the five treaty ports and treaty revision in twelve years and the latter stipulating in addition the free propagation of Catholic Christianity. The fixed tariff system (meaning that China would not be able to create tariff barriers in the future), the most-favoured-nation clause (granting the recipient equal trade advantages as the 'most favoured nation' of the country granting the privilege) and extraterritoriality (exemption from the jurisdiction of local law) were especially injurious to the Qing China's sovereignty. The British, French and American treaties reinforced each other and created the 'treaty system' which entailed the forcible exaction of trade and diplomatic privileges from a militarily weak Qing state by the West, a process that was enriched by later arrangements. China's markets were open to foreign goods, European 'zones of influence' were being created within China's borders and the Qing government had lost control of a number of the state's internal and foreign policies. China's 'Century of Humiliation' had begun.[17]

The Second Opium War or The Arrow War (1856-1858 AD) between an Anglo-French alliance and China resulted in nm Anglo-French victory and the Treaty of Tiensin (1858 AD) which entailed- (i) permanent residence of British diplomats in Peking, (ii) opening to trade of ten new ports, (iii) foreign travel in all parts of China with a passport issued by the consul and countersigned by the Chinese authorities, but no passport required for travel within 100 kilometers of the ports, (iv) inland transit dues on foreign imports not to exceed 2.5% *ad valorem*, (v) indemnity of 4 and 2 million taels to Britain and France respectively and (vi) freedom of movement in China for all Christian missionaries, Catholic and Protestant alike. This treaty was evidently a lot harsher to China than

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[16] Wakeman, "The Canton Trade and The Opium War," pp. 163-212
[17] Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China* p. 192-193

earlier ones and the Chinese authority's reluctance in letting foreign diplomats enter and reside in Peking led to a skirmish whichultimately resulted in the burning of the emperor's Summer Palace, the thorough looting of the Forbidden city and the Convention of Peking (1860 AD) which entailed- (i) British diplomatic representation in Peking being permanently affirmed, (ii) the indemnity being raised to 8 million taels each for Britain and France, (iii) the opening of Tiensin, in addition to the ten ports of the previous treaty, to foreign trade.[18] Meanwhile, Russian authorities governing eastern Siberia had slowly moved into northern Chinese territories, occupied and fortified strategic points and by the 1850s, was strong enough to threaten Peking's safety. Therefore, the Treaty of Aigun was signed to keep the Russians at bay, which entailed the cession of territory on the northern bands of Amur and Sungari rivers to Russia, joint possession by China and Russia of the land east of the Usuri river to the sea and these three rivers being closed down for all states except Russia and China.[18]

Immanuel C.Y.Hsu rightly comments that by 1860, the ancient civilization that was China had been thoroughly defeated and humiliated by the West.[20] However, this was just one side of the coin as China was facing a range of internal problems at the same time which were present from the eighteenth century (as noted above) and intensified in the nineteenth century due to the widespread changes brought to the Chinese society and economy by foreign elements (also noted above), culminating in a series of destructive rebellions. The most intense of these, the Taiping rebellion (1850-1864 AD), originated in the south-western parts of China and was led by the Christian Hakka Chinese teacher Hong Xiuquan who claimed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. The rebel army moved northward along the Yangze river valley and controlled  Nanking and a large part of southwestern and western China from 1853 AD to 1864 AD. The Taipings aimed to displace the Qings to create a radically different state in terms of hierarchy, land distribution etc and could repulse the Qing bannermen and the Chinese Green Standard Army, but were ultimately defeated by provincial armies under traditionalist provincial leaders like Zuo

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[18]Ibid, pp. 212-216

Zongtang and Li Hongzheng who also had help from foreigners in Shanghai.[19]Other rebellions of smaller scale were, as follows:

(i) the Nien uprising (1851-1868 AD) mainly comprised of secret gangs of bandits and landless labourers who received support from the Taipings,

(ii) the Muslim uprising of Yunnan led by Tu Wen-hsiu who unified the disgruntled Muslim minority of north-western China to establish a sultanate,

(iii) the Muslim uprising of Tungan led by Ma-Hualong.[20]

Interestingly, these rebellions were mainly brought down by the provincial armies. This made clear that the central government had become weak in all aspects and led to a decentralization of power among the leading provincial elite. Therefore, the late nineteenth century Qing empire was severely weakened as a culmination of internal and external problems which reinforced each other. Its foreign policy was, due to the treaty system, pretty much controlled by the West; and its internal policies were, following the rebellions mentioned above, controlled by the provincial military governors nominally loyal to the throne.

**The Japanese Case: The Tokugawa Crisis**

The island-state of Japan (*wajinchi*) had, by the seventh century AD, been unified under one ruling dynasty which claimed descent from the mythical Yamato clan that was said to have descended from the sun goddess. The emperors of Japan and the imperial court controlled Japanese politics for quite some time, but after 1185 AD power shifted to a hierarchy of military land-owners, at the top of which was a person who was given the title '*shogun*' (military deputy) by the emperor. During the late sixteenth century, military leaders Oda Nobunaga and Hideyoshi Toyotomi emerged victorious from the civil war following the Ashikaga shogunate's downfall and after Toyotomi's death (1598 AD), power shifted to Tokugawa Ieyasu, one of Toyotomi's five chief subordinates and the overlord of Kamro region, After the battle of Sakigahara (1600 AD), most of the lords of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu submitted to Tokugawa authority and Ieyasu had himself

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[19] Perdue, "Late Imperial China," pp. 99-126
[20] Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, pp. 232-245

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declared shogun in 1603 AD. Ieyasu also succeeded in making sure that his descendants retained the position of shogun. The emperor at Kyoto retained a nominal status as the highest political and religious authority, but the real center of power was in Tokugawa capital Edo (later Tokyo). The *bakufu* (shogunal government) directly controlled a quarter of Japan's land-mass which was dominated by Tokugawa branch-families and the rest of the land-mass was dominated by about 260 *daimyo* (local lords) who maintained autonomy in day-to-day administration of their *han*s(domains) in exchange of tribute and a show of subordination by a number of rituals like the *sankin-hotai* (alternative attendance, residing in Edo every other year and keeping their family hostage there when away). There were two kinds of daimyo- *fudai* (hereditary vassals) and *tozama* (lords who submitted to Tokugawa authority only after Sakigahara and were not allowed to participate in the bakufu administration). This system of checks and balances, the *bakuhan (bakufu-han)* system maintained order in Japan for two and a half centuries. Another measure of preserving stability by the bakufu was to prevent any change in every aspect of the state. In 1640 AD, the bakufu issued an order prohibiting any contact with the outside world with the exception of the Dutch traders who were allowed to do business in Nagasaki and served as the knowledge-source for of foreign affairs.[21]

Some fundamental traits of the Tokugawa policy led to its crisis in the future:

(i) Not completely uprooting the imperial house in Kyoto and emerging as an independent ruling dynasty left the bakufu dependant on the Kyoto imperial house for legitimacy and quite vulnerable.[22]

(ii) The bakufu also failed to stop the process of change altogether. Population growth, inflation, commercialization strained the rice-based self-sufficient village economy, leading to a destabilizing of inter-village relations; a crisis that the *tozama daimyo* countered more effectively than the bakufu leading to the shift of economic power to their hands.[23]

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[21] Janet E. Hunter, *The Emergence of Modern Japan: An Introductory History Since 1853* (New York: Longman, 1989) pp. 2-4

[22] Ibid, p. 5

[23] Marius B. Jansen, "Introduction," in Marius B. Jansen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Japan* vol. 5 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) pp. 1-34

In spite of the ban, foreign contacts had intensified well before the famous Perry mission (1853 AD). The growing Russian and Japanese commercial interest in the Kuril islands led to the arrival of the Russian admiral Nikolai Rezanov in Nagasaki (1804 AD) with a letter from the Tsar Alexander I seeking trade privileges and refusal on the bakufu's part led to nuisance raids in southern Kurils and northern Honshu by Rezanov's lieutenants. Although Russian attention shifted to Europe following the Napoleonic Wars, this brief intrusion secured quick intellectual responses. While Sugita Gempaku pointed to Japan's loss of martial spirit, Kude Heisuke and Heyashi Shihei implored the government to strengthen Japan's military defense. The turbulence in Dutch politics, Holland's war with Great Britain and the loss of all south-east and east Asian Dutch colonies except Deshima trading post of Nagasaki to the latter forced Deshima authorities to charter foreign ships to supply merchandise without letting the bakufu know of these affairs, but the forced intrusion of a British ship in Nagasaki demanding and, when refused, snatching supplies before leaving shocked the bakufu. Interrogation revealed the events of a fast-changing West (ex: the American and French revolutions) and renewed interest in Western studies. Superficial understanding and arbitrary assumptions led to the bakufu's suspicion of the existence of one Western superpower posing as many states (ex: Russia, Holland, England) resulting in the infamous 'don't think twice; (*ni-nen-naku*) order of 1825 AD instructing coastal authorities to shoot any 'Western' ship at sight, whatever their intention.[24]

The news of China's defeat and humiliation at the hands of Great Britain rattled the bakufu's understanding of the world around it. Intellectuals like Shionoya Toin who were influenced by the Chinese scholar Wei Yuan's writings believed that Japan faced the same threat China was experiencing. Intensive study and survey revealed to the bakufu the Western countries' military superiority, leading to the abandoning of the 'Don't think twice' order to avoid a war Japan could not win. However, the bakufu's refusal to reply to the Dutch king William II's letter warning the shogun of the West European threat to Japan revealed its indecisive

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[24] Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) pp. 258-269

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approach to the changed environment.[25]Marius B. Jansen has remarked that the Tokugawa system was coming to the end of its resources and was unlikely to respond to future challenges with imagination or effectiveness.[26]

U.S interest in Japan began because of (i) the concern for the safety of American whalers in the Pacific region who procured whale oil, the only fuel in the U.S.A for lamps before 1858 AD and (ii) the increased traffic of American steamships to China following the Treaty of Wanghia (1844 AD), necessitating a coaling station *en route*. The first U.S mission to Japan (1846 AD) led by Captain James Biddle aimed at securing trade relations failed. The second mission, headed by Commodore Mathew C. Perry who based on his readings on Japan and the experiences of the Biddle mission, believed that only overawing and frightening could make the Japanese cooperate, reached Edo Bay on July 2, 1853 AD, with four ships mounting sixty-one guns and carrying 967 men. Perry demanded (i) protection of seamen and property, (ii) permission to obtain supplies and, if at all possible, a depot for coal and (iii) permission to enter one or more Japanese ports to dispose of U.S cargo by sale or barter. Perry returned in February, 1854 AD and in the **Convention of Kanagawa**- (i) two Japanese ports Shimoda and Hokadate were opened to U.S ships to receive supplies and coal from; (ii) shipwrecked American sailors would be helped and returned; (iii) the Americans were permitted to pay for the supplies they received.British and French representatives soon followed with similar demands which were granted in 1855 AD.[27]

The question regarding how to respond to such foreign pressure created deep divisions within the daimyo: some proposed to delay the implementation of the treaty conditions while preparing for war against the foreigners, some (like Ii Naosuke) suggested to accept the demands for the time being and others (like the Mito governor Tokugawa Nariaki) professed all-out war. This dispute was complicated by the succession dispute following shogun Iesada's death (1757 AD) between the 21-year-old Hitotsubashi (Tokugawa) Yoshinobu (Keiki) and the 12-year-old leader of the house of Kii (future shogun Iemochi).

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[25] Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan,* pp. 270-273
[26] Jansen, "Introduction," pp. 1-34
[27] Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, pp. 274-279

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An important development of this period was **the re-assertion of the imperial authority of theKyoto court headed by emperor Komei**. In 1846 AD, the imperial court suggested the bakufu to concentrate on Japan's coastal defense. In 1854 AD, it issued an order to melt down temple bells to make guns- the first time in the Edo period that the court had taken it upon itself to issue a national directive.[28]

Another important phenomenon was the formation of 'loyalist' (*shishi*) groups across Japan which mainly comprised of lower-class samurai (a warrior class that formed the basis of shogunal Japan's military strength) and young rural elites who were influenced by the 'Mito learning' as represented by Aizawa Seishisai's 'New Thesis' (a form of education arguing the importance of developing a national polity based on the purity of Japan's imperial tradition); dissatisfied with their condition and eager for upward socio-economic and political mobility and vaguely aware of the 'danger' Japan was facing from foreigners and the bakufu's inability to deal with them. Some of them, especially from the south-western 'outer' hans, joined service under the imperial court of Kyoto and strengthened it, while others formed into extremist groups with a clear but unplanned aim of 'driving out the barbarians' and following the motto "sonno joi" (Revere the emperor! Drive out the barbarians!).[29]

Another strand of response to the foreign threat came from samurai scholars, most of whom took a traditionalist or modernist stand. Sakuma Shozen, who propagated 'Seiyo no gei, Toyo no doteku' (Western science, Eastern morals) blurred this boundary. His student Yoshida Shoin, with his radical ideas of abandoning the existing status system in employment and sending Japanese students to foreign countries to study their knowledge in order to empower Japan to eventually become a world presence, greatly influenced future Meiji leaders.[30]

Townsend Harris, the American consul, had arrived in Shimoda in 1856 AD with the aim of securing for the U.S.A four ports for trade and

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[28] W. G. Bensley, "The Foreign Threat and The Opening of The Ports," in Marius B. Jansen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Japan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) pp. 259-304

[29] Marius B. Jansen, "The Meiji Restoration," in Marius B. Jansen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Japan* vol. 5 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) pp. 308-360

[30] Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, pp. 287-293

residence. By 1858 AD, a treaty was worked out where Japan promised to open five ports between 1859 and 1863 AD for American trade and residence. However, when the leader of the Senior Council Hotta Masayoshi went to Kyoto to receive imperial approval, daimyo against this treaty sent representatives to the court urging xenophobic and politically ignorant court officials to decline the bakufu's request and support the succession of an 'able' candidate (Keiki) for the post of shogun. This flung the already ambitious court into the center of political attention.[31]Unable to secure court approval, Hotta resigned and Ii Naosuke succeeded him as leader of the Senior Council and also the regent (tairo). Ii Naosuke turned the bakufu into a totalitarian regime: he signed the treaty with Harris on July 29, 1858 and ten days later declared the succession of the Kii leader as shogun, both without the court's approval. What followed was known as the 'Ansei purge" where moderate bureaucrats from Abe Masahiro's time were either dismissed or demoted, daimyo who tried to lobby in the imperial court to influence the succession struggle (ex: Tokugawa Nariaki, Matsudaira Shungaku) were either executed or driven to retirement and even some court nobles were punished. Naosuke's trend toward dictatorship came to an abrupt end when he was cut down (1860 AD) by 18 Satsuma and Mito loyalist-extremist samurai who accused Ii of "… ignoring the imperial will".[32]

Following Naosuke's fall, the bakufu followed a policy of reconciliation (*kobu-gattai*) with the Kyoto court and the daimyo by appointing 'outside' (tozama) daimyo and other victims of the 'Ansei purge' to high bakufu posts (it is during this time that Hitotsubashi Keiki became the Guardian of the young shogun) and stationing them in Kyoto instead of Edo. This only succeeded in bringing new political players to the fore. The imperial court wielded more power than the bakufu now, evident from the shogun Iemochi's prolonged stay at Kyoto (1863 AD) to attend some imperial ceremonies. The tozama governors were irresponsible and always put their interests ahead of the bakufu's, there was conflict between Edo and Kyoto bakufu officials because of their different experiences, duties and interests and the irrational and impossible ideas of the court and Kyoto bakufu officials (tozama lords) to 'drive out the

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[31] Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan,* pp. 283-285
[32] Jansen, :The Meiji Restoration," pp. 308-360

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barbarians' which only led to flawed policy decisions. For instance, the bakufu's relaxation of the 'alternative attendance' system (1862 AD)  to give the daimyos enough time to militarize their domains to prepare for the 'impending battle' against the foreigners only weakened its control over them. The effort to form a marital alliance between Kyoto and Edo by marrying princess Kazu to the shogun Iemochi (1861-1862 AD) only worsened the relations between the two because emperor Komei was against this marriage and sent a stern order to Edo to drive the foreigners out. He was assured on behalf of the shogun by Keiki that this would be done by June, 1863 AD, despite its impossibility.[33]

Meanwhile, xenophobic extremist activities of 'loyalist' groups were increasing everywhere in Japan. One group in Tosa orchestrated the murder of the daimyo's first minister; an insurrection of samurai and *ronin* (dismissed samurai) in Mito (1864 AD) was stopped with some difficulty;the British merchant Richardson's murder (1862 AD) by a Satsuma samurai resulted in the English gunships attacking and burning the Satsuma castle-town of Kagoshima (1863 AD); the Chosu han's policy being controlled by loyalists and the resultant Chosu shelling of foreign ships 'following the imperial court's orders' at the Straits of Shimonoseki (1863 AD) and finally, in the summer of 1864 AD, Chosu attack on the Satsuma-Aizu protective cordon thrown around the imperial palace, resulting in the defeat of Chosu, the expulsion of radical Kyoto officials to Kyushu and the branding of Chosu as an .enemy of the court by emperor Komei. Seizing the opportunity, the bakufu rallied Satsuma and other 21 daimyo into forming a large army and marching against Chosu. Although there was no battle due to the triumph of a conservationist regime in Chosu over the radicals, the Tokugawa rally earned the bakufu much respect. However, they could not regain their former dominance and, following the rise of yet another radical elite in Chosu,, the bakufu was not able to get the support it received the first time due to the alienation of most of the notable daimyo because of its desperate centralizing efforts and its collaboration with France to modernize its military.. At about this time, shogun Iemochi died and Hitotsubashi Keiki succeeded him (1866 AD).[34]

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[33] Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, pp. 297-304
[34] Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan,* pp. 302-307

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Although widely praised for his talent and abilities and the smooth running of the modernization process under him, Keiki's term was cut short by the transformation among the tozama daimyo of the strong anti-foreign sentiment to an anti-bakufu sentiment (fuelled by bakufu connections with the French authorities and the potential of it becoming technologically and militarily more advanced than the daimyo) contained in the slogan *tobaku* (overthrow the bakufu!). The Satsuma, Tosa and Chosu daimyo joined forces in 1867 AD to displace the bakufu in favour of the imperial authority in Kyoto. The Tosa representative presented to the shogun Sakamoto Ryoma's 'Eight Point Plan' which required the bakufu to restore all power to the imperial court in order to completely change Japan's politico-economic nature to conform to Western standards (ex: a two-house parliament, a navy etc). Keiki agreed and declared his abdication the next day. However, Satsuma and Chosu claimed that the creation of such a state was possible only after the confiscation and re-distribution of all Tokugawa land (this was done mainly to remove the Tokugawas from any future equations of power). An order was secured from the new boy-emperor Mutsuhito to chastise the Tokugawas. On 3rd January, 1868, the Kyoto authorities proclaimed the Restoration of Imperial Rule of Old (Osei fukko no daigorei). The days of the bakufu were officially over, but the imperial order to surrender all Tokugawa land drove Keiki to offer battle. In the battle of Toba-Fushimi (January 27) the Tokugawas faced a crushing defeat and ceased to operate as an effective political force.[35]

The Meiji era that followed saw the rise of a centralized Japanese state which strove, and succeeded, to conform to the Western standards of modernity, civilization and power while retaining some of its ancient heritages. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Japan was a completely transformed state. Janet E. Hunter has rightly pointed out that by the end of the Meiji period, Japan, with its Western-style industrial economy serving the foundation for a Western-style military and infrastructure and an education system propagating the greatness of the state, all of it operating in the name of the emperor, was already victorious in two international battles against China (11894-1895 AD)

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[35] Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan,* pp. 307-314

and Russia (1904-1905 AD) and was counted as a world power and a possessor of colonies.[36]

## A Short Comparison Between the Qing and Tokugawa cases:

Contacts between China and Japan and Chinese general influence on Japanese society and politics since ancient times meant that there were bound to be some similarities between the Chinese and Japanese imperial orders and the challenges both of them faced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For instance, both the Qing and the Tokugawa authorities were highly influenced by Confucian and neo-Confucian ideals of social hierarchy and stability and therefore made the preservation of the existing social order their first priority, which was also aimed at serving the political purpose of perpetuating their own authority over their respective states. This preservation of the existing order also entailed a policy of seclusion from the outside world (which could potentially trigger undesirable social change), which both states followed to varying degrees. This seclusion was supported, in both cases, by a self-sufficient village economy that made trade with the outside world less necessary and was broken, again in both cases, by an ever-increasing Western pressure in the nineteenth century for trade rights; pressure from Western states which were militarily far superior to both the Qing and the Tokugawa states. The breakdown of this seclusion intensified existing internal problems which resulted in the loss of the authority of Edo and Peking over their respective domains. The 'Western impact' also produced an array of scholarly response in both states (ex: Wei Yuan in China and Yoshida Shoin in Japan), contributing, to a degree, to the way their future would be dictated. In spite of these similarities, there were certain fundamental differences in the nature and functioning of these two states that resulted in completely distinct experiences of imperial decline.

Firstly, the basic differences between the nature of the Qing and Tokugawa states facilitated their different experiences. Qing China was a centralized, patrimonial-bureaucratic empire controlling vast territories even outside China (ex: Inner Asia). On the other hand, the Tokugawa

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[36] Hunter, *The Emergence of Modern Japan* p. 5

state was, at best, a mix between 'feudal' and 'imperial', where the bakufu tried to control over 200 semi-autonomous daimyo. Moreover, in the Qing case, the emperor's position as the only absolute authority was unrivalled for most of its lifetime, whereas the Tokugawa state was characterized by duality in this respect as the shogun, in spite of being practically the highest authority, depended on the nominal highest politico-religious authority, the emperor, for legitimacy.

Secondly, the root of all of Qing China's internal problems (ex: bureaucratic competition and corruption, intensification of the patronage system, mass-migration and conflict) seemed to be its uncontrolled population rise. Although population rise and the resultant commercialization posed a problem to the Tokugawa state too, many daimyo (especially the major tozama lords) were able to successfully combat it. Although this indirectly contributed to the shifting of economic power from the bakufu to the outside lords, the rivalry between the two rather than the rise of population seemed to be the principal source of the bakufu's problems.

Thirdly, the difference between the way the Europeans and the Americans viewed China and Japan and the way these states viewed the foreigners shaped their experiences in the future. It is true that the Western states had mostly trade interests in both of these states and both Qing and Tokugawa states viewed the Westerners as 'barbarians', certain differences in these apparently similar perspectives made all the difference. For instance, Japan was always a secondary target for Western merchants. It did not carry the same commercial importance China did because of the great demands of Chinese tea and silk in the Western markets. In fact, U.S interest in Japan was intensified only because of its potential as a coaling station for U.S ships bound for China.

While China's flawed assumption of Western inferiority was broken only after two crushing defeats against Great Britain and France, these very experiences (and encounters with the Russians and the English even before these events) served as a warning for the bakufu, the daimyo and even a section of the subject population in Japan. The subsequent events in Japan revolved around the 'fear of the

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West' and 'avoiding the fate of China' became the bakufu's prime priority.

Fourthly, radical and violent activity was a common feature of both of the weakening regimes which originated in response to increasingly unfavorable situation around it. However, these had drastically different characters. In China, ethno-religious minorities disgruntled with the existing system used the tremendous financial and social pressure the peasants faced to rally them (mostly those belonging to that minority group) against the governments, aiming at either toppling the Qings or breaking away from them to establish new states dominated by this group's interests. There were a number of rebellions with generally this same aim in the nineteenth century (ex: the Taiping rebellion, the Muslim rebellion of Yunnan). The anti-state forces in China were divided between several ethno-religious groups and had no consensus between them, but Japan's extremist forces were unified by the motto of *sonno joi* (Revere the emperor! Expel the barbarians!). They were more of an anti-foreign than an anti-bakufu force and called themselves 'loyalists' (*shishi*). However they were loyal only to the emperor and to their respective daimyo rather than the bakufu, strengthening to a great degree the hitherto powerless but ambitious imperial house of Kyoto and lessening the bakufu's control. Unlike China, Japan's extremist forces had no connection with the peasantry and were mostly manned by disgruntled lesser samurai and young, non-samurai rural elites. They carried out individual assassinations instead of open rebellions (except the Mito and Chosu cases). The 'loyalists', instead of separatism or usurpation, aimed at ending the foreign threat altogether and restoring power to the emperor. Although they were crushed, loyalism and anti-foreign sentiments became a mainstream aspect of late Tokugawa politics.

Fifthly, it took China more time than Japan to respond effectively to the 'Western threat'. This decided the very different courses the two countries would take in the future. This is aptly illustrated by the difference between Chinese and Japanese responses regarding China's defeat in the first Opium War. In spite of its defeat and the humiliating treaty, China did not divert its resources to strengthen its military

forces[37], whereas in Japan the news of this event resulted in a swift intellectual and government response and a slow but sure trend towards military modernization.

According to Peter C. Perdue, however, China's slow response was due to the challenges it faced from extremely diverse enemies from both within and without: among foreign powers, it faced Russia in the north and mainly Great Britain, France and the U.S.A in the south. Most noteworthy of the internal challenges were the Taiping Rebellion in south and south-eastern China and the two Muslim rebellions in north and north-western China. In comparison, Japan faced less challenges. The Westerners were less hostile, the extremists were more easily crushed.[38] This, along with other advantages (ex: a less diverse subject population, less involvement of the peasantry) might have allowed Japan to respond more swiftly to the changed politico-economic and social environment.

**Conclusion:**

Eighteenth and nineteenth century China and Japan were similar but distinctly different entities, each facing unique but somehow related set of challenges to which they responded differently. This difference in the two states' approach towards challenges also determined their future positions. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Qing China was reduced to a semi-colonial state with little control over its own resources, while Meiji Japan, with its centralized control, Western-style industrial economy, army, infrastructure and education system, was well on its way towards becoming a globally recognized imperial power. This also leads to the realization that although there are general definitions of 'Empire', every empire should be viewed as unique political units and should be studied with this in mind.

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[37] Perdue, "Late Imperial China," pp. 99-126

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