The Self-Strengthening Movement:
Inevitable Failure?
A historiographical review on the Self-Strengthening Movement in comparison with the Meiji Restoration

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When asked about Japan, many people are immediately reminded of samurais wielding their icy swords, house banners waving in the wind, Geishas adorned in their delicately decorated kimonos singing their eerily beautiful songs, and ancient little jinjas (shrines) with their multi-layered Torii gates guarding countless statues of Shinto creatures and deities. However, people are also reminded of the advanced technology modern Japan boasts; they think of Toyota, of Honda, of Sony and Panasonic and remember in awe that Japan is now one of the most technologically and industrially advanced nations of in the world. Then the gaze shifts to Japan’s neighbor: China, with its vast lands that hold near a quarter of the world’s population. Once the most advanced empire in the world, looking down upon even the likes of Great Britain, the nation now known as the People’s Republic of China has only come to enjoy technological and industrial success within very recent decades. History had strewn both Japan and the mighty Qing Empire into the same devastating whirlpool of shifting world dynamics not much more than a century ago, but the two nations surfaced with drastically different degrees of success. I have always been interested in why this difference came about: why were the Japanese so successful with their process of modernization, or more specifically, with their modernization movement, the Meiji Restoration? Why did their neighbor, China, suffer devastating defeat to both Western forces and Japan itself, after going through their Self-strengthening Movement that had basically promised all that the Meiji Restoration promised for Japan? I attempted to search for an answer through intensive reading of historical sources, looking into commonalities the two movements shared, parts in which they differed, in hopes of finding an answer to my question. The following paper is the fruit of my readings: a historiographical review of 21 essays and books written by various scholars on my topic of interest. Looking mainly into Chinese sources, I was surprised to discover a noticeable contrast between two major fields of thought: it seems that although scholars generally share similar opinions regarding the Meiji Restoration of Japan, one large group of scholars believe that the Self-Strengthening Movement of the Qing Dynasty was destined to be an inevitable failure, while another believed that the movement had in fact proven effective. Generally speaking, the first group of scholars I will discuss believes that, due to China’s much longer history of feudal rule along with the idea that the Self-Strengthening movement was a movement that mainly pushed to maintain order of the Qing Dynasty rather than an actual movement of change, the Self-Strengthening movement was inefficient and ineffective, destined to be a failure. The second group of scholars disagrees with the first on the fact that the Self-Strengthening movement was a total failure. As a matter of fact, this group of scholars believe that, although the Self-Strengthening movement did not help the Qing Dynasty westernize like the way Meiji Restoration helped Japan, the Self-Strengthening Movement was still extremely effective while it lasted. With great advance shown in projects such as the Jiangnan Arsenal, this group of scholars believes that the Self-Strengthening movement was a movement that mainly pushed to maintain order of the Qing Dynasty rather than an actual movement of change, the Self-Strengthening movement was inefficient and ineffective, destined to be a failure. The second group of scholars disagrees with the first on the fact that the Self-Strengthening movement was a total failure. As a matter of fact, this group of scholars believe that, although the Self-Strengthening movement did not help the Qing Dynasty westernize like the way Meiji Restoration helped Japan, the Self-Strengthening Movement was still extremely effective while it lasted. With great advance shown in projects such as the Jiangnan Arsenal, this group of

1 “封建专制” a term that is often mentioned and used by the first group of scholars. Recent historians argue that due to its roots in Marxism, it is not a good fit for the dynastic rule of China. In the following paper however, the term will show up often as translated from the original article and essay, but it is referred to as the dynastic rule that lasted for thousands and thousands of years in China before the fall of the Qing Dynasty.
scholars refutes the argument that the Chinese had been inefficient in its Self-Strengthening movement and that the movement’s failure was an ultimate result of chance.

The Meiji Restoration

The Tokugawa period (est. 1603-1868), also known as the Edo period, boasted of a reign of 265 years, spanning over a time in history well known for general peace and prosperity in Japan. In fact, despite the weakness and corruption of the Tokugawa Shogunate (the “Bakufu”) during its last days in existence, the Japanese still look over this period in time with fondness and nostalgic sentiment. This was an era of honor and a period of booming cultural development: when the “Boshido (The Way of the Samurai)” spirit was true and the arts of Japan at full bloom. Even to this day, we constantly see Japanese films and animations made based on the many heroes born in this era. Steady streams of novels and manga are also dedicated to this symbolizing period of Japanese history. However, the once-powerful Tokugawa Shogunate eventually came to an end in 1867, when the Meiji Restoration began. As a response to the threat of the West, as well as the inner corruption of the Bakufu itself, the Meiji Restoration brought about numerous changes that paved for Japan its road to modernization.

Despite the corruption and weakness of the late-Tokugawa Bakufu, the Tokugawa Shogunate had brought to Japan an era of general peace and prosperity for over 200 years. During this period, the strict hierarchical structure of Japanese society was reinforced, with a member of the Tokugawa clan as the absolute ruler of society, followed by the Daimyo and the Samurai. The farmers, artisans, and merchants made up the common class, with the merchant class being the least respected class. The Japanese Emperor remained the head of state but received no actual power, a mere puppet on display for religious and political purposes. Although the system proved to be efficient for more than two centuries, the structure of society eventually lead to a widened gap of discontent and hatred between the ruling class and the commoners, resulting in a great increase in rebellions toward the late-Tokugawa period. The arrival of Mathew Perry, an American Commodore who intimidated the Bakufu into signing Japan’s first unequal treaty, (the Kanagawa Treaty) was the last push that launched Japan into its famous modernization movement: the Meiji Restoration, with slogans such as “Fukuoku Kyoei (Enrich the Nation, Strengthen the Military)”, “Wakon Yousai (Japanese Spirit, Western Science)”, and “Sonou Jyoi (Restore the Emperor, Repel the Barbarians)”. After a period of civil war in Japan, the last Tokugawa Shogun resigned in November 1867.

The Self-Strengthening Movement

China, throughout its 5000 years of history, has been under the feudal rule of absolute monarchy for as long as anyone can remember. Up until the Qing Dynasty, this form of governance had generally bided well for the various empires situated in the land. It was in China where the first concepts of most of the world’s greatest inventions were developed, and it was in China where the arts, the writing, and the philosophy of the Eastern World originated. China had been the unwaveringly most powerful nation in the world for most of the world’s history, with different dynasties exerting different degrees of influence on its neighbors and even nations of far beyond. However, this balance of power gradually made a shift towards the other half of the world, the Western part. Much historic debate is made over when and why this had happened – the topic itself is enough to write volumes and volumes of books for – but as intriguing as this debate is, it is unfortunately not the topic of this research paper. Instead, this paper focuses on a period after the shift of balance had occurred. This is the period known to the Chinese people as a period of disgrace: when the Qing Empire, corrupt and outdated, found itself overwhelmed and brought down by not only Western powers, but by its neighboring nations that had once been mere tributes to the Emperor. The Self-Strengthening Movement was promoted during this time, after the shame and disgrace from a series of military defeats to the West called for patriotic awakening within the Qing
Empire. Prince Gong and his newly established “Zongli Yamen (Office of Foreign Affairs)” swiftly launched a series of reforms and attempts toward modernization, including the incorporation of Western military technology, the recruiting of foreign advisors, and the distribution of scholars overseas. However, due to reasons mentioned in the following paper, the Self-Strengthening Movement still failed in the fact that it was not able to help the Qing Empire trim its ruffled feathers; the movement eventually ended in failure, with the Qing Empire losing war after war against foreign enemies until it became what was no better than a just another colony of various Western Powers.

There are many reasons as to why the two modernization movements of two similar Asian countries, caught in similar situations of the same time period, could end so differently. According to my readings, it seems there are two major opinions on this matter, one being that the Qing Empire was unsuccessful in achieving a significant level of modernization, which inevitably lead to its continued military defeats, and the other being that due to various reasons, although the Qing Empire suffered continued military defeat even after the launching of its Self-Strengthening movement, the movement itself had proven effective for the Qing. My review of scholarly work is as follows.

The Self-Strengthening Movement: an Inevitable Failure?

Chinese historian Cha Jihong sees the Self-Strengthening movement as the Qing Dynasty’s last chance at modernization. He voices his opinion that a difference in ideology was the main reason why the Qing inevitably failed in modernization while the Japanese succeeded. “The Chinese has always believed that the ways of their ancestors cannot be thrown away, former-day traditions cannot be thrown away, that it was crucial they followed through ‘ancestral structure’ and ‘ancestral law’”\(^2\). According to Cha, it is exactly the Qing Dynasty’s tight grasp on tradition that heavily intervened with the development of its modernization movement. While many officials within the Qing Court realized the dire need for modernization and pushed for the introduction of advanced Western thought and technology into China, many others were too conservative and attached to the old ways to allow true revolutionary action to take place. Conservatives feared more for the loss of their own existing benefits more than their fear of the fall of the Dynasty; therefore, they tried all they could to slow down the pace of China’s modernization. Factions within the court worked against each other, slowing down the development of solutions of both sides. As agreed with by many other Chinese historians, the Self-Strengthening Movement was a movement launched to protect the structure of the existing Qing government. The priority was that the Qing government could survive through foreign threats with the help of newly introduced technology and ideology from the West. In comparison, the Japanese, on the other hand, was able to introduce the concept of Westernization into its nation with a lot more ease, as the opposing factors had already been eliminated with the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate. With full freedom to experiment with new concepts, the Japanese were understandably much efficient in their studies of Western thought and technology.

This is a thought shared by many other scholars, such as historian Liu Yicheng. In his essay “China and Japan’s Paths to Modernization”, he states that there are three main differences that led to China’s inevitable failure and Japan’s ultimate success: governmental structure, military, and education. Similar to Cha’s opinion, Liu Yicheng also believes that the difference between governmental structures played an important role on the outcomes of the two movements. He further believes that the difference in governmental structure also led to development of very different markets. “Different from China, the feudal system of Japan had somewhat loosened at the hinges before the Meiji Restoration. The

self-sufficient natural economy of Japan had begun to disintegrate, and the bud of capitalism already growing into a dominating force in society. Japan’s turn toward capitalism, he thinks, was the key factor to Japan’s industrialization. In contrast, while the Qing Dynasty had also tried very hard to industrialize as part of its modernization movement, the industrialization mainly happened in government-owned factories. Unclear management led to a lack of efficiency, along with the corruption of court officials that ran these factories, the development of these factories and enterprises were extremely slow and unpromising. Unlike most Japanese industries that had come to support themselves over time, many Chinese industries ended up in bankruptcy after the government continued to lose foreign wars and could therefore no longer afford to keep such industries running. Song Hongbin strongly supports this claim in his book “Currency Wars”, with the example of the “Hanzhiping Company” established during the Self-Strengthening movement. A multi-functioning iron, metal, and coal enterprise, the company was the largest and most technologically advanced of its kind in the whole Eastern world. However, two fatal errors crushed all dreams of the iron empire within a few short years. The first error had to do with the selection of raw material. A Qing official who knew next to nothing about iron headed the industry. When it was proposed that a study of specific type of rock to be used for iron be held, he arrogantly replied the technicians to “choose whatever.” “China is so vast, can you name even one kind of rock that she does not contain? If not,

why waste time and energy over such tedious manner?” The technicians then proceeded to using British standards for Chinese rocks, which happened to contain much more phosphorus than British rocks. The resulting iron, of course, was brittle and unsellable, devastating the factory financially. In contrast, the Japanese conducted 11 different experiments and study conferences on details regarding various aspects of the iron-welding technology before putting the practice to use.

The second error was the selection of location. Logically speaking, it would have been the most scientific and cost-efficient to build the factory closer to mines. However, the head of the company, despite unanimous professional objections, chose to have the factory located closer to the city so that it was more convenient for “supervision.” The extra fees to ship raw material was more than just significant; this along with the earlier mentioned issue eventually led to the downfall of China’s first great iron empire.

Military Revolution played a huge role in both nations’ modernization movements. While both nations focused heavily on the modernization of military technology, many Chinese historians believed that the Chinese failed to modernize their military tactics and focus like the Japanese did. The Chinese, according to Li Yicheng, Wu Yan, and Jin Surui, were highly successful in their modernization of weaponry. “By 1865, the Huai armies had reached a number of 50,000, and have abandoned their traditional Chinese guns, having transited into the use of western muskets.” The establishment of the Beiyang, Nanyang, and Fujian Arsenals helped produce the 78 warships of the Qing Navy. The Beiyang Navy was the strongest amongst the three, with over 20 ships and two of the largest battleships in Asia. According to western analysts in 1891, China ranked #8 globally in naval power, while Japan ranked a mere #16. However, Japanese modernization of military structure proved to make up for the difference in ranking;

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5 “自给自足的自然经济” literally translated into “self-sufficient natural economy” which refers to how Japan had managed to maintain its economy solely on the resources within its own borders with limited or next to no trading with the outside world.

4 Yicheng Liu, 刘义程 Zhong guo yu ri ben de xian dai hua zhi lu 中国与日本的现代化之路 Jing gang shan xue yuan xue bao 井冈山学院学报. (Vol. 27 Jiangxi: Jinggangshanxueyuanchubanshe, 2006).

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5 Hongbing Song 宋鸿兵, Ming zhi wei xin yu yang wu yun dong 明治维新与洋务运动“Huo bi zhan zheng 货币战争, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Zhongxin Chubanshe, 2007).
the Beiyang Navy suffered a full defeat in the First Sino-Japanese war. Many Chinese historians believe that, while Japan was intently focused on defeating foreign enemies having already strengthened both their inner political and military structures, the Qing focused much of its fruits from modernization on the defeat of inner enemies, such as the Taiping Rebels. Military Command was split between numerous commanders who were highly interested in their own political benefits rather than the benefits of a unified nation. As a result, in foreign wars against nations such as France and Japan, the lack of unity and the ineffectiveness of the employing of ships led to devastating defeats that crushed the Chinese Navy once and for all.

Many Chinese historians also believe that education greatly boosted Japan’s chance of success with modernization. While both nations included education as part of their plans of modernization, the two nations went about doing so in very different ways. The Qing Dynasty sent abroad over 200 young men the court believed to be bright and loyal to the nation. According to author Shen Qixin, these scholars focused their studies heavily on western industrialization, especially on the mining industry. However, after their return to China, very few were put to use in their actual fields of studies. Instead, the Qing Dynasty still heavily relied on the western experts they had hired, who predictably did not have the nation’s best interests at heart. Also, while the Qing had proceeded to send abroad scholars in an attempt to modernize through education, the traditional structure of education remained the same. The group of scholars that were sent abroad remained the only group of people having received any form of modern education. In contrast, the Japanese went on to replacing their hired western professionals with their own scholars, therefore maximizing the effects of their experience abroad. Along with that, the Japanese government proceeded to revolutionize the nation’s educational structure, shifting the focus of education away from Confucianism and Classics, but to modern western education. Schools for all ages were set up in order to raise the general level of knowledge and literacy of the population. This greatly boosted the speed of modernization and the general population’s acceptance of newly introduced western ways, such as western legal systems, western science, western art, and so on. In the Qing Dynasty, conservatives who were pro-traditional continued to be a large opposing force against the Qing Dynasty’s steps toward modernization.

The Self-Strengthening Movement: A Downright Failure or A Chance Lose?

From most of my essay up to this point, the idea that the Self-Strengthening Movement as an inevitable failure much less superior than that of the Japanese Meiji Restoration seems to be a reoccurring theme. However, there is still a group of scholars that do not agree with this kind of logic. In fact, many scholars believe that, despite the devastating military defeats the Qing Military suffered even after the launching of their self-strengthening movement, the movement itself was still highly effective in many ways. Many modern Chinese scholars, according to this group, tend to overlook the immense period of growth the Qing Dynasty went through due to the devastating outcome of the foreign wars that followed. “We must not throw the Self-Strengthening Movement flat out onto a historic surface and simply ‘connect the dots’; nor should we use the defeat of the Qing in the Sino-Japanese War as the only standard of success.” According to scholars Liang Dawei and Huang Dingtian, most scholars critics the Self-Strengthening Movement from either a political standpoint, arguing that the failure of the movement was inevitable due to its purpose of protecting the feudal system instead of overthrowing it; or from an economic standpoint, that the movement refused to follow through a natural pattern of economic development, limiting private industries and preventing a national industry from blossoming; some even critic the movement from a cultural standpoint, that the movement only focused on the tiny leaves on

7 Dawei Liang, 梁大伟, Huang Dingtian 黄定天, Tong tu shu gui zhi si: Yang wu yun dong yu ming zhi wei xie de zai shen shi 同途殊归之思：洋务运动与明治维新的再审视, Dong bei shi da xue bao 东北师大学报 (Jilin: Dongbeishida Chubanshe, 2011.).
the branches of a very large tree, that it was neither thorough nor deep. Liang and Huang argues that although both nations were, at the time before their modernization movements, feudal nations, the depth of feudalist rule in Japan was nowhere near as deep as it was in China. Therefore, it was much easier for the Japanese to do away with their old structures than for the Chinese to throw away the foundation of thousands of years. Another argument of theirs focuses on the demography of the two nations: that China, with its vast land and numerous ethnicities, faced a lot more resistance in the spread of new ideas and culture. Japanese, with the exception of less than 5% of its population, was mostly homogeneous, making it much easier for new ideology to be spread and accepted.\(^8\) Other scholar’s such as Benjamin Elman would likely agree with this view. In his essay that focuses on Chinese naval warfare from 1865-1895, he states that the inadequacies of the Self-Strengthening Movement had resulted in “poor armaments, insufficient training, lack of leadership, vested interests, lack of funding, and low morale.”\(^9\) Elman, however, believes otherwise. In his essay, he lays out evidence of the Self-Strengthening Movement having played a massive influence on the development of modernization in China at the time. He also refutes the claim that the Meiji Restoration of Japan had helped Japan rise to a superior position than that of the Chinese, claiming that the superiority of Japan “was generally accepted after 1895 because of the success of its navy.”\(^10\)

Another scholar of similar opinion, quoted by Elman himself, is Meng Yue. In her studies of the Jiangnan Arsenal, Meng also points out how there seems to be a universal opinion that progress was “continuous” in Japan since the 1868 Meiji Restoration, while the Self-Strengthening Movement of 1895 proved useless for the Chinese. She disputes this claim and joins the other scholars of my second grouping in proving that the Qing, through their course of modernization, was in fact not less superior to the Japanese, that its military defeat was not inevitable, and that it had actually had a chance to come out as the upper hand. With the technology produced by the Jiangnan Arsenal as her main example and evidence, Meng Yue proceeds to explaining how not only was the technology boasted by the Qing superior than that of the Japanese, they were extremely advanced industrially as well. She refutes the general belief that the knowledge of scholars who returned from abroad was wasted by showing how they were incorporated into crucial spots in the arsenal, and also shows how military leaders Zeng and Li had a clear mindset as to where and how the navy needed to proceed.\(^11\)

This group of thought forces all to rethink the status of the Qing Dynasty during the period of the Sino-Japanese war, and questions whether or not the Self-Strengthening Movement was the devastating failure of the century or not.

**Conclusion**

Having started out with readings that seemed to one-sidedly suggest the incompetence of the Self-Strengthening Movement in comparison to the Japanese Meiji Restoration, I was extremely surprised to find a rising voice in the opposing side of that commonly accepted opinion. The first main group of scholars I had read firmly believes that the Self-Strengthening movement was an inevitable failure due to its ineffectiveness and insincerity. These scholars argue that the Meiji Restoration was ultimately successful because it carried out its main purpose of creating change in the nation. However, the arguments that have been brought up by this group of scholars have been refuted by another group of equally learned historians. This group of historians believes that while the Meiji Restoration was indeed successful and no doubt crucial in aiding Japan on its way to modernization, the effect of the Self-

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8 Liang, *Tong tu shu gui zhi si.*


Strengthening Movement was in no way inferior to that of the Meiji Restoration. They argue that chance played a heavy role in the Qing defeat to foreign countries, and that the effects of the Self-Strengthening Movement have been downplayed due to the various defeats the Qing dynasty suffered to both Japan and the West. Through the reading and analysis of essays and books from both groups of scholars, I have come to the point where I must rethink my original question: why was the Japanese so successful with their process of modernization, or more specifically, with their modernization movement, the Meiji Restoration, when China suffered devastating defeat to both Western forces and Japan itself, after going through their Self-strengthening Movement that had basically promised all that the Meiji Restoration promised for Japan - is such a question still valid? With the acquirement of more knowledge, it seems obvious that my original view of the Self-Strengthening Movement of the Qing as a failure is too absolute, and that although it can and should still be contrasted with the Japanese Meiji Restoration, it can no longer be seen as an inferior movement. In general though, the deep roots of feudalist structure of China, along with rising political factions, the development of national economy, and the widespread of education still remain factors as to why the Self-Strengthening Movement was not able to launch in full effect, also explaining why the Japanese were able to be relatively thorough in their process of modernization.

**Bibliography**


