



# Academic Significance and Contemporary Value of Comparative Study on the Reform of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty in the Late 19th Century

SUN Jing<sup>[a],\*</sup>; WANG Ziyi<sup>[a]</sup>; ZHOU Bingxin<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> University of Jinan, Ji'nan, China.

<sup>[b]</sup> Shihezi University, Shihezi, China.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 23 January 2022; accepted 27 February 2022

Published online 26 March 2022

## Abstract

In the middle and late 19th century, East Asian countries gradually embarked on the road of modernization after the hit of the West. China, Japan and Choson Dynasty, as representatives among those countries, had adopted corresponding reform measures. Among them, the Chinese Westernization Movement and the Japanese Meiji Restoration have been much examined in terms of historical facts, but the analysis of Eo Yun-jung reform of Choson Dynasty and the comparison of the reforms of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty in the late 19th century is slightly insufficient. Thus this paper attempts to make a preliminary interpretation of the academic significance and contemporary value of those reforms through the review of academic history and the theoretical discussions, looking forward to arousing more attention and leading more profound researches on this topic.

**Key words:** The reform of China; Japan and Choson Dynasty; 19th century; Academic significance; Contemporary value

Sun, J., Wang, Z. Y., & Zhou, B. X. (2022). Academic Significance and Contemporary Value of Comparative Study on the Reform of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty in the Late 19th Century. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 18(1), 9-12. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/12479>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12479>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the middle and late 19th century, Western imperial powers gradually broke the relatively closed East Asian

world. The Opium War of 1840 ended China's closed-door policy; the Perry Expedition in 1853 ended the situation that Japan only opened Nagasaki to trade with China, Korea and the Netherlands. And Japan, which began the Meiji Restoration, also started to conduct aggression and colonization following the Western imperial powers, forcing Choson Dynasty to sign the 'The Japan-Korea Treaty of 1876'. Later, the Western imperial powers also attempted to enter the Korean Peninsula.

Faced with external challenges, all of the three East Asian countries have carried out top-down reforms: China's Westernization Movement, Japan's Meiji Restoration, and Eo Yun-jung reform in Choson Dynasty. The effectiveness of these reforms were embodied in the 1894 Sino-Japanese War of 1894: the failure of Eo Yun-jung reform, the outbreak of the Donghak uprising in Choson Dynasty, the begging of the Li Dynasty to China for help, and Japan availed itself of the opportunity to get into the Korean Peninsula. Finally Choson Dynasty was completely controlled by Japan, and China was forced to sign the Treaty of Shimomoseki with Japan. All of the three East Asian countries have chosen to reform at almost the same time, but received different results.

## 2. ACADEMIC VALUES

### 2.1 Theoretical Meaning

The Opium War in 1840 was generally regarded as the beginning of the history of modern China according to the historians in mainland China, while the Meiji Restoration was considered to be the most important turning point in the history of modern Japan. The Eo Yun-jung reform could also be considered as the last large-scale reform before Choson Dynasty was controlled by Japan. Although the three reforms occurred in the traditional East Asian countries, factors of learning from the West were also contained. More importantly, the three reforms have similarities in social structure, international order and

other aspects, which constitute the theoretical basis for the comparison.

First, as to the social structure of recent East Asia, China, Japan and Choson Dynasty are all agricultural societies based on small-scale peasant economy, just slightly different in specific circumstances. China has shown the characteristics of a 'Four occupations society' and has adopted policies that stressing agriculture and restraining commerce; entering the era of Tokugawa regime, Japanese bureaucrats were mainly composed of samurai while the Confucian existed as a group alone for consultation. The shogunate used 'Goikou' to show its authority and asked the samurai to be loyal to it. The social structure of Choson Dynasty is very similar to China, the only more prominent difference is that Choson Dynasty has much developed trades.

Second, the traditional international order in East Asia is mostly described as 'Tributary system of China', using the suzerain-vassal relationship to outline the relations of East Asian countries: China is suzerain, while other countries such as Choson Dynasty, An Nanguo, Ryukyu are vassal states. Although Japan separated from the 'Tributary system of China' at an early time, it still closely associated with China in politics and economy due to the geographical location and other reasons.

Third, in terms of communication with the West, China, Japan and Choson Dynasty were relatively isolated, sharing extremely limited contacts with the West before being forced to open their doors. Christian activities were banned under the Tokugawa regime in Japan since 1640 and Roman Catholic activities were also banned during the Yongzheng period in China. Korea mainly developed diplomacy with China and Japan and was hostile to Japan. In that era, there were limited exchanges between the East and the West. For example, the George Macartney mission visited China during the Qianlong period, the A. E. Laksman mission visited Japan, China opened the Thirteen Hongs of Canton to trade with Europe, the United States and other countries, and Japan opened Nagasaki to trade with the Netherlands. Apart from this, China, Japan and Choson Dynasty basically maintained the closed-door policy.

To sum up, the three countries with similar realistic conditions show some similarities in both internal social structure and external communications. Based on this, the theoretical significance of this paper is as follows:

First, it can deepen the understanding of the 'Western impact-China's response' pattern of John King Fairbank. John King Fairbank's 'Western impact-China's response' pattern focuses on China, pointing out that the traditional China has been in a leading position in Asia for a long time, but it has been challenged by Western civilization in modern age. To cope with this shock, the intellectuals of the Qing Dynasty launched the Self-improvement Campaign. John King Fairbank believes that ancient China has stagnated for a long time, lacking the impetus

to break through the traditional framework and China began to transform into a modern society after being hit by the Western imperial power in the 19th century. Although some scholars such as Paul A. Cohen doubts his opinion, the 'Western impact--China's response' pattern typically represents the mainstream view of American history academia about the modern history of China.

In this way, John King Fairbank's theoretical framework not only has a certainly explanatory power for modern China, but also for modern Japan, Choson Dynasty even Vietnam. By comparing the modern reform movements of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty, we can observe different responses of different countries in face of common challenges, so as to enhance the understanding of the 'Western impact--China's response' pattern.

Second, it can extend the revolutionary analysis paradigm of Theda Skocpol. The famous *States and Social Revolutions* of Theda Skocpol compares the French Revolution, the October Revolution of 1917 and the Chinese Revolution from 1911 to 1960s from a structural perspective, pointing out that the combination of state structure, international power and class relations leads to social revolutions. But it was doubted after publication because the relevant archives of China and USSR were not full disclosure at that time. However, Theda Skocpol's analysis creates a new access into comparing the reform of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty. There is no difference in essence between revolution and reform, which are both phenomenons that the community itself seeks changes for survival when social contradictions inspired to a certain extent. Just revolution is more radical while reform is more gradual. In this regard, by quoting Skocpol's revolutionary analysis paradigm, a comparative analysis of the modernization reform of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty from the perspective of national structure, international power and class relations will enrich the theory of social changes.

## 2.2 Academic Meaning

Current research work of the reforms of East Asia countries in the late 19th century mainly focuses on China and Japan. Most of the existing studies have characterized the Chinese Westernization Movement as a reform in Implements Aspect, rather than a political system, and formed a gradual in-depth sequence of 'implements-system-thought' with the subsequent Hundred Days' Reform, 1911 Revolution and New Culture Movement. But Japan's Meiji Restoration carried out a combination of measures in all aspects of politics, economy and culture, such as Ōsei fukko, Bunmei kaika Haihanchiken, and Shokusan kōgyō. In terms of methodology, previous studies mostly describe the processes of the two reforms of China and Japan separately, such as Chen Xulu's research on social changes in modern China and Fan Baichuan's review of the Chinese Westernization Movement, while Japan opened a bureau of history in

the late Meiji period, recording the reform process in detail. For example, Ōkuma Shigenobu's *Fifty Years of New Japan*, Maruyama school represented by Masao Maruyama after the World War II reflected on the ideological history of this period from Tokugawa regime to the early Showa era. Anyway the Eo Yun-jung reform of Choson Dynasty has not attracted enough attention. In terms of methodology, researches specially for the comparative analysis of the reforms of the three countries has not been found. The description of the three reforms also focuses on the historical facts and the narrative of the event itself but lacks social structure analysis in a wide range. Accordingly, the academic value of this paper is as follows :

First, pay attention to institutional and structural changes besides the 'Implements Aspect' and explore the social factors hidden in those different reforms. For example, China, Japan and Choson Dynasty all had taken measures to encourage trades during reforms, but the Qing government adopted the mode of government supervised and merchant manage in the Westernization Movement, which was extremely inefficient and caused extremely serious corruption. Instead, Japan implemented the policy of 'Shokusan kōgyō' to foster private capital and generated privileged big capitalists such as Mitsubishi and Mitsui. China and Japan both replicated the western economic pattern but China pays more attention to the bureaucracy's function of controlling while Japan gives more freedom to private capital and uses national policies to support the development of enterprises.

Second, the three reforms can be combined with their domestic practical problems. When the three reforms began, each country faced severe social problems, for example, The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement in China, the great 'Ikki' ( civil mutiny or civil rebellion) in the late Tokugawa bakufu period and the continuous Donghak uprising which integrate folk beliefs in Choson Dynasty. However, most scholars regard reform as an independent event, lacking the combination of the process of reform and social background, neglecting the comparison of the actual situation of different countries. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement in China promoted the position of Han bureaucrats in Qing Dynasty and provided an opportunity for bureaucrats who support Westernization to introduce Western technology. But the enterprises established during the Westernization Movement were too delicate to disintegrate the small peasant economy. In addition, disasters such as Ding-wu Disaster also hindered China's modernization process. In the Meiji era, 'Ikki', which mainly concerns about land rent, broke out five times in Japan and finally the largest 'Iseibōdō' among those 'Ikki' made the Meiji government compromise with the people. All of these domestic social problems have led to different overviews of the three reforms in those three countries. So, the analysis of social

structure and problems of the reforms will help deepen the understanding of the social background of the three reforms in their countries.

### 3. CONTEMPORARY VALUE

At present, China's policy of reform and opening-up has entered a critical stage and a deep water zone. How to overcome difficulties to continue the reform thoroughly requires not only the courage of persistence, but also the wisdom of reform. By reviewing and comparing the reform process of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty in recent times, it is helpful to improve the understanding not only of social traditions in China but also academic research on reforms. As the birthplace of Japanese and Choson Dynastyn civilization, China is not only close to Japan and Choson Dynasty in geography, but also part of the Confucian cultural circle. Therefore, the reform experience of modern Japan and Choson Dynasty has greater referential value for China.

### 4. RESEARCH APPROACH

Based on the actual condition of the reforms of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty, the research approach of this issue can be summarized as follows.

First, revision of the historical facts of Eo Yun-jung reform. The exploration of Korean historical materials is not deep in mainland China because of the limitation of language, which is an important reason for the ignorance of Eo Yun-jung reform. Since *The Collection Works of Eo Yun-jung* has been published, the archives, notes and records of the reform in that era should be fully utilized.

Second, considering the structural factors, examining the reasons for the different reform results of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty directly. Bureaucrats, which are basically Confucians, were selected by election in both China and Choson Dynasty. In the era of Tokugawa regime, Japan adopted hereditary system. Samurai was the main part of bureaucracy, while Confucianism was more likely to be a group attached to bureaucracy. So Confucianism did not coincide with bureaucracy or existed as a region for samurai, who took 'loyalty' of Bushido as their spiritual support. Therefore, after Anti-Bakufu Sentiment, the collapse of the samurai class cleared the obstacles for the Meiji Restoration. Since the bureaucrats in China and Choson Dynasty were mostly Confucians, as a self-closed philosophical system, Confucianism rejects western theories, advocating ideas such as 'Western Learning for Application', 'Learning from the foreigners in order to gain command of them'. As China's vassal state, Choson Dynasty learnt more from the Chinese Westernization Movement. Although Eo Yun-jung thought about criticizing Confucianism, but the criticism was not complete.

Third, comparing the internal access of the three countries' reforms from the perspective of ideological history. Recent China, Japan and Choson Dynasty had no concept of modern nation-state and tend to take Confucian view of Huayi in face of external hits. This nationalism based on Confucian view of Huayi has greatly influenced the reform of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty. China stuck to the mentality of 'Middle Kingdom', so the ultimate goal of 'Learning from the foreigners in order to gain command of them' is to defeat the barbarians, nothing to with the regime; In contrast, Japan has taken a more open attitude. It is worth noticing that Tokugawa Nariaki's new policy, which was extremely hostile to foreign countries, adopted the viewpoint of 'theory of expelling the barbarians' but failed eventually at the end of the Tokugawa regime. But the Meiji Restoration was more influenced by Sakuma Shōzan and others. Masao Maruyama used to point out that Sakuma Shōzan, Yoshida Shōin, Fukuzawa Yukichi and other reform thinkers have a consistent nationalist logic and they promoted Enlightenment on the basis of it. Although many traditional Japanese ideological factors such as Fukuzawa Yukichi's belief that the success of Meiji Restoration is due to the spirit of 'やせがまん' (hold on or similar spirit of 'Do what you know you can't do') have been retained by the reform thinkers, the awakening of civic awareness did greatly pushed Japan to embark on the road of modernization. Fukuzawa Yukichi's *An Encouragement of Learning* advocates that citizens should have independent and free personality, which is in sharp contrast with *An Encouragement of Learning* of Zhang Zhidong who supports China's Westernization Movement, holding the view that 'Chinese learning concerns itself with moral conduct. Western learning, with the affairs of the world.'

Fourth, this paper takes diplomatic corps sent by the three countries as an entry to examine the key points of the three countries' reforms. Sending diplomatic corps, such as China's Guo Songtao mission to Britain, Japan's Iwakura Tomomi mission, Choson Dynasty's Shenshi Inspecting Group, is one of the important ways for China, Japan and Choson Dynasty to learn from the outside world during that period. Most personnel of diplomatic corps are senior officials in their nations. These officials directly participate in the reforms after returning home. The specific measures in the reform are the reflection of these officials' cognition of the external world. The three countries are not isolated from each other in their external learning, they frequently interact with each other. Previous studies on diplomacy of Qing government focus on Office for the General Management of Affairs Concerning the

Various Countries. In fact, Li Hongzhang's 'Tianjin Diplomacy' also plays an important role in promoting mutual understanding between China, Japan and Choson Dynasty during the reform period. Li Hongzhang become famous since the signing of the China-UK Chefoo Convention. The diplomatic ability of efficiency of Li Hongzhang were better than Office for the General Management of Affairs Concerning the Various Countries, so foreign countries prefer to deal with Li Hongzhang in Tianjin. For example, Kim Yun-sik, the envoy of Choson Dynasty, investigated the Western situation through Tianjin diplomacy and co-chaired the reform with Eo Yun-jung.

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## 5. CONCLUSION

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The comparison of the reforms of China, Japan and Choson Dynasty in the second half of the 19th century not only helps to explore the structural factors neglected by previous historians, but also deepen the understanding of the society in transition from the perspective of ideological and social history. In this way, a comprehensive investigation of the reform from the perspective of long-term, structural and holistic view can be conducted. In addition, the comparative analysis of the three countries' reforms can achieve the effect like 'stones from other hills may serve to polish the jade of this one', providing empirical support for the current reform of China. Only by taking history as a mirror can we have a definite aim and go far steadily.

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