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*THE MODERNIZATION OF EAST ASIA. A COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF CHINA, JAPAN AND KOREA*

*EUROPE AND CHINA: CULTURAL HETEROGENEITY VERSUS
HOMOGENEITY*

The long and complicated process of the formation of European culture began in the fourth century when the religious worldview of one of the non-conformist Jewish splinter groups - preserved for three centuries by Christian communities living in a social ghetto - penetrated the political institutions of the Roman Empire. When this happened, the administrative hierarchy of the far-flung empire became a carrier of "seditious" conceptions born in peripheral Palestine. It was precisely at this point that Jewish religious ideas began to effectively penetrate Mediterranean civilization which, within several centuries, they would

transform into "Christendom," a hybridic, dissonant and dynamic cultural circle.

Christendom came into being as the synthesis of two separate traditions, as a peculiar compromise between primitive Christianity and the Greco-Roman world. Christian ideas, which in time reshaped the institutional system of the Imperium Romanum, underwent great changes and lost their original character in the course of this process. More than anything else, this ambiguous victory of a Palestinian faith over a refined pagan culture weighed on the fate of Western civilization. This partial success of the new religion, Christianity, in the conflict with the old order became a source of structural tension and a powerful centrifugal force that continually transformed European culture. One can say that the unprecedented dynamism of Western civilization was thus encoded in the very combination of Jewish and Mediterranean traditions - a combination that left the possibility of continual interaction open to these traditions.

Traditional Chinese culture - unlike that of Europe - was, firstly, a homogeneous culture, and secondly, it was every inch an indigenous

creation. To put it simply, Chinese civilization was a thoroughly Chinese invention. This is a trivial, yet exceedingly weighty point. The facts speak for themselves, Old Testament - the most fundamental European book - was originally written in non-European languages: Hebrew and Aramaic. The European religion was born outside Europe - in Asia! Furthermore, long before Christianity came to the Mediterranean world, both Greeks and Romans had willingly borrowed numerous cultural items from the Middle East and ancient Egypt.

European civilization, however paradoxical this may sound, was to a great extent a non-European creation. This very fact accounts for the European readiness to borrow and adopt ideas, institutions, and material devices developed in alien cultures. "If pagan philosophers," St. Augustine wrote, "have happened to enunciate a truth useful to our faith, (...) there is not only no reason to fear such truths, but an obligation in our interest to take them away from their illegitimate possessors" (*De doctrina christiana*, II, XL, 60). St. Hieronymus advocated a similar line when he proposed that Christian writers deal with pagan customs as the Jews in the last part of the Pentateuch had dealt with

slave women before marrying them: shave their heads, cut their fingernails, and give them new robes. Augustine's and Hieronymus's rule was not a novelty. On the contrary, it was followed without scruples for centuries by legions of bishops and Church doctors who in thus enriched Christianity with various symbolic codes and ideas developed in alien civilizations.

This European openness to the cultures of others and a readiness to assimilate them contrasts sharply with the Chinese tradition. "I have heard," Mencius says, "of men using the doctrines of our great land to change barbarians, but I have never heard of any being changed by barbarians" (*Discourses of Mencius*). The Chinese have never doubted their place in the world. They called their land *Zhongguo* - the "Middle Kingdom" and hammered out the concept of a universe composed of concentric circles of which China was the hub and which became increasingly less civilized the further one moved away from the glorious core. When all other people were seen as barbarians, not only was there no need to learn anything from them, but certainly no need to be interested in them. Little wonder, then, that by the end of the nineteenth century, only a few foreign ideas and

devices had gained acceptance or credence in China.¹ It is also no wonder that significant replacement of traditional institutions by new ones borrowed from the West did not happen until the twentieth century.

The early Chinese empire under the Qing and Han dynasties (221 BC-220 AD), with a population roughly estimated to be close to sixty million at the height of its prosperity, is often compared to Rome, as it reigned over a territory approximately as vast. The Chinese empire, however, maintained for over two millennia an unmatched continuity and internal cohesion that was entirely alien to the West. Moreover, this staggering cohesion in the realms of politics, economy, and culture contrasts dramatically with Europe's all-pervading pluralism and heterogeneity.

¹ One of these, however, was Buddhism which began to penetrate into the Kingdom of the Centre in the first century AD from fiefdoms and oases in Central Asia scattered along the Silk Route. It was undoubtedly the most important Chinese cultural borrowing. Despite its periods of flowering and development, especially in the seventh and eighth centuries, Buddhism always remained a marginal phenomenon in the culture of China. Disdained and combated by Confucian elites, it merged in time with local beliefs and magical practices and gained limited influence, mostly among the lowest social classes.

China's imperial unification in the third century BC was a major breakthrough in world history. No parallel to this gigantic accomplishment has ever occurred elsewhere. Besides, China's unification - unlike the growth of the Roman Empire or its successor political structures - established a fixed pattern to be perpetuated for millennia. This astonishing and permanent petrification of a political system was facilitated by the time and the brutality of the unification. The subjugation of a huge area of China under a uniform, central government took place sooner than the local customs, institutions, and crystallized social groups could have been shaped. Thus the weak and unsophisticated regional cultures were destroyed without trouble, by the fire and sword.

The destruction of local Chinese cultures was conducted by the Qin dynasty with unrestrained brutality. Philosophical treatises and historical chronicles of all the kingdoms except for the Qin were burned;² the educated who dared protest were buried alive. In place of the hereditary feudal lands, 40 provinces were established, divided into districts, and ruled

² Destruction of these texts was made easy by the fact that they were written on bamboo slats which were difficult to hide due to their rather grand dimensions.

by officials nominated by the emperor; additionally, 120,000 ancient, aristocratic families were resettled from the conquered fiefdoms to the then-capital Ch'ang-an. Regional languages were extirpated and replaced with a new, uniform system of signs. The monetary system, as well as measures of dimension and weight, were homogenized. Finally, even the distance between wheels on wagon axles was set and made identical throughout the country.

The structural simplicity of Chinese society during the unification made it possible for the state to develop the centralization of power to its extremes. It is impossible to find another case in world history where such tight control over such a vast territory was ever exercised by a central government. The omnipresent and omnipotent state vis à vis an undifferentiated and hardly integrated society easily managed to block the emergence of any other nation-wide institutions that might have threatened its power and position. Furthermore, the state monopoly and administrative controls were substitutes for the complex division of labour and interchangeability of services that otherwise would have appeared as results of spontaneous economic processes. Thus, for

example, the buying and selling of commodities by state officials drove wholesale dealers out of existence, while the financial administration of the government hovering over villages did not allow the development and operation of China's industries at a higher level.

The Chinese state, unlike European empires, remained unchallenged by any institution throughout its history. It had no serious competition from a hereditary aristocracy, from a religious organization, from provinces or a coalition of cities, or from a politically potent military component. This was the case of the shen-shi (bureaucracy) as well, powerful enough not to let any social stratum, especially merchants, grow beyond restricted limits. In the Shih-Chi (Historical Notes), compiled around 90 BC, a special chapter deals with the merchants of that time, some of whom owned steelworks, while others traded in salt. The Imperial bureaucrats attacked them and easily destroyed their economic power with an act against luxury and with ruinous taxes. "Charges were brought forward all over the empire," we read there, "against men who attempted to conceal their wealth from the levy; practically every family of middling means or over found itself under

accusation. (...) The wealth confiscated from the people was cash, (...) slaves, (...) fields, (...) houses. Practically all the merchants of middling or better means were ruined. The district officials found themselves with more and more funds at their disposal, due to the salt and iron monopolies and the confiscation of wealth." This scenario would recur in China countless times. In its wake would occur a situation described by Sir John Pratt in about 1880: merchants from Shanghai turned to the authorities in Beijing for the right to elect a town council and mayor, i.e., permission to create an institution already known in Europe for a few hundred years.³

The father of the Chinese Republic, Sun Yat-Sen would characterize his countrymen as a "plate of sand," which may remind us of Marx's comparison of the peasantry to a "sack of potatoes." This association was by no means casual. The Middle Kingdom, even at the beginning of the twentieth century, was nothing but an agricultural country. So, historians estimate that in 1920 no more than five percent of the Chinese knew how to read and write, and the entire Chinese

³Quote after: J. Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in the East and West*, London 1972, p. 185.

working class numbered two million persons - which was still a "drop in the bucket" of the huge population of the subcontinent.

Dealing with a weak, undifferentiated and hardly integrated society, the Imperial bureaucrats were preoccupied with the concept of governance through cultural control and were noted for their unreserved commitment to the upholding of traditional norms and values. It was these norms and values that made up social bonds and served as a link between loose conglomerate of village communities and the state apparatus. The official Qing policy of upholding cultural homogeneity at all costs only strengthened the static character of the state. The stubborn defence of traditional models blocked the evolution of the country in any direction. It thwarted the creation in China of the modern industrial production which in Europe had already begun to supplant agrarian social institutions and set the foundations for the capitalist system.⁴

⁴ This did not change the fact that, in the first phase of its existence, Confucianism had played a highly creative role in the history of China. It built up, on the basis of the theory of central authority and bureaucratic hierarchy, the solid foundations of the powerful, united empire. Furthermore, one could even say that the imposition of a universal cultural model on the varied provinces of the immense territory

The Confucian premise that a ruling dynasty's fall was a simple consequence of its inability to rule well - a task that required a man of outstanding moral qualities⁵ - constituted a crucial ideological factor that petrified the Imperial regime. Never was it assumed that dynastic demise should be related to inadequate institutions. Instead, imperial decline was believed to be brought about by the leadership's failure to discharge properly its function of "the people's father." "The innumerable peasant rebellions through Chinese history," writes Joseph Needham, "rarely pushed the Confucianist's thinking beyond the establishment of a new and better dynasty."⁶ A government's fall, it was believed, could only be reversed by the fresh release of a new ruler's moral vigor. Thus, throughout China's history issues of social, economic, and political structures were overlooked as sources of internal conflict or crisis. Just the opposite, it was assumed time and again that each new dynasty had to continue created the homogenous Chinese nation.

⁵ In contrast with the Legalists which considered physical repression and harsh criminal law as the primary instrument of state authority, Confucius set high ethical standards for the ruler, proclaiming a conception of rule based on virtue.

⁶ J. Needham, *The Grand Titration*, p. 256.

the policies of its predecessor with better effectiveness while leaving the eternal political institutions untouched.

THE CHINESE LESSON FOR JAPAN

Confucianism, with its vision of rigid social stratification: bureaucracy - farmers - craftsmen - merchants, handed down by the eternal Laws of Nature, constituted an ideology of an agricultural nation. Stability and order emanated from the application of that ideology in practice; and it ensured foreign respect for China for many centuries. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century - when the Western powers made their way to China's coast and crushed the resistance of the Manchurian Dynasty - that the weaknesses of Confucianism were revealed instantly and drastically.⁷ But even then, the Chinese were not ready to abandon it.

The shock came for the first time in 1840, when Manchurian soldiers, equipped with spears, stood in battle against a British foe with cannon-

⁷ *Kuo Sung-Tao, the first delegate of the Qing Dynasty sent to Great Britain in 1876 - shocked by the contrast in civilizations between England and China - succinctly avouched: "Confucius and Mencius have led us astray."*

armed warships. However, after the Opium War, the Chinese government never conducted any inquiry to find out what had really happened, nor sent observers abroad to learn Western technical achievements, nor made institutional readjustments as the Japanese did. The plans for modernizing the Chinese army offered by the American delegation were unhesitatingly turned down. Of all the clauses included in the Treaty of Nanjing signed in 1842, the one which pained the court in Beijing most was that thenceforth diplomatic correspondence with the barbarian Westerners was to be exchanged ... on equal terms.

A few decades later, in 1895, China was defeated by Japan on land and sea. This defeat - as a result of which the Chinese lost Taiwan, and titular control over Korea - seriously damaged the national pride. In the past, China had fought Japan several times, yet never had had to recognize the latter's military superiority. At the end of the nineteenth century, this balance of power submitted to a radical shift. Japan, quickly having modernized its institutions since the time of the late Tokugawa period, took backward, agrarian China by surprise with its indubitable military advantage. This advantage

became painfully clear - literally - on the battle fields.

The crushing defeat of China during the Opium Wars had served as a great lesson for the Japanese, but not the Chinese. The clearest example of this was the victory of Japan over its Asian neighbour in 1895. The defeat of "Chinese order" at the hands of "Western barbarians" during the Opium War roused a powerful shock among the leaders of samurai circles and gave rise to a serious debate on the subject of national security. As a result of that debate, the Japanese turned to the Dutch in 1854 with a request for assistance in building a modern naval fleet; the Japanese placed orders for steamships and three years later a naval academy was established in Nagasaki led by Dutch officers.

Simultaneously the central government in Tokyo ordered a detailed reconnaissance of the weaponry and battle tactics of the British fleet and radically shifted its attitude to non-military foreign skills. In 1871 Prince Iwakura Tomomi's mission embarked from Japan on a nearly two-year journey whose aim it was "to seek wisdom across the whole world." The duty of

Iwakura's mission was to gain direct knowledge about the United States and the primary countries of Europe. Almost 100 persons took part in this expedition, including over 40 members of the ministry and 5 women. This last fact reveals the level of the Japanese determination to copy the West. In Confucian society the egress of a woman beyond her family's domain entailed an unprecedented revolution in customs!

Divided into groups so as to learn as much as possible, the members of Iwakura's mission diligently spent time visiting, penetrating, and observing the unknown world. They were interested in everything, from shipyards and foundries, to candle and button factories. Reports from the mission underline the civilizational backwardness of Japan and the necessity of learning from the West. After Iwakura's return to his homeland, the Tokyo government began systematically employing advisers from the West. Hence in 1890 approximately 3,000 foreign specialists were working in Japan. Experts from Germany founded medical schools and universities. Americans organized the postal and agricultural services. The English modernized the Japanese fleet, built

telegraph lines, and railway tracks. The army, in turn, took advantage of the services of French advisors. Even Italian sculptors and painters were brought in to familiarize Japanese artists with the secrets of European art. All of this was guided by Fukuzawa Yukichi's motto of "civilization and enlightenment." At the same time, in 1888, the Russian religious thinker, Vladimir Soloviov was among those who heard a lecture by the Chinese general, Tong Chen-ki, at the Paris Geographical Society during which the general told the Europeans: "We are capable of adopting from you everything that we need - all of your cognitive and material culture - but we do not. We will not adopt any of your beliefs, any of your ideas, nor even any of your preferences. We like only ourselves and respect only strength. (....) We are happy with your progress, but we neither have the need, nor the desire to participate in it."⁸

During the Meiji period the Japanese abolished the traditional four-class social system and renounced Confucian-type learning in order to implement Western knowledge not only in science and technology but also in the institutional

⁸ Quote after: W. Soloviov, *Sobranije sochinienij*, vol. VI, Saint Petersburg 1906, p. 85.

sphere and everyday practice. For Japan it was much easier than for China to follow a foreign lead. Its high culture had originally been borrowed from abroad to such an extent that literacy itself had had to wait for the adoption of externally derived systems of transcription. It is therefore not at all strange that the wave of modernization in the Archipelago even carried with it a proposal to replace ideograms with the Latin alphabet! Neither is it surprising that one of the earliest pronouncements of the first Meiji government in 1868 justified the decision to open Japan towards Western influence by citing relations with China in antiquity.

While conservatives committed to the old values were strongly entrenched in nineteenth century Japan, there also existed a clear realization that the cultural heritage had come from abroad and could be replaced by other foreign patterns that now demonstrated their efficiency in the form of economic and military superiority. An influential intellectual, Fukuzawa Yukichi argued in 1885 that Japan should "part with Asia." "Although China and Korea are our neighbours," he went on, "this fact should make no difference in our relations with them. (...) If we keep bad company, we cannot avoid a bad

name. In my heart I favour breaking off with the bad company of East Asia."⁹ The then Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru rendered the same idea in positive words: "Let us change our empire into a European-style empire. Let us change our people into a European-style people. Let us create a new European-style empire on the Eastern sea."¹⁰ In doing this the Japanese did not reject indiscriminately the whole body of traditional culture but, quite the opposite, retained a large part of it. Following Sakuma Shozan's slogan of "western science, eastern morality," they did manage to create a new quality: a kind of dynamic synthesis of Shinto-Confucian tradition and Western culture. In this respect modern Japanese civilization shows up a deep structural affinity to that of Europe which came into being as a hybridic blend of Jewish religious beliefs and Greek-Roman heritage.

JAPANESE FEUDALISM

Japanese feudalism - the political system based on the permanent hegemony of the Tokugawa clan, which emerged at the beginning of the

⁹ As cited in: M. Jansen, *Japan and its World. Two Centuries of Change*, Princeton 1995, p. 67.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

seventeenth century after a period of chaos and civil war and was to last for over a quarter of a millennium - is called by historians bakuhan, which means "bakufu and feudal states." The word bakufu (literally: "tent rule") refers to the institution of the shogunate - the centralized government encompassing all of Japan; han, on the other hand, means the autonomous political unit ruled by a prince (daimyo), standing at the head of the local administration comprised of samurais, members of the hereditary caste of warrior-overseers. The mutual relationships between the elements of the triad: shogun - daimyo - samurai were based on principles of feudal dependency between the lord and the vassal. In order to avoid surprises and assure itself permanent control over the 250 fiefdoms, bakufu turned to shrewd subterfuge such as holding the sons and wives of feudal princes as hostages. Except for this, the shogunate excluded the most important cities and mines from provincial jurisdiction, subjecting them directly to its control. It also granted itself a monopoly on foreign trade and the minting of coins. Finally, it armed and maintained the mightiest military forces in the country.

The system transformation begun by the first shogun from the Tokugawa clan, Ieyasu, was accompanied by parallel shifts in ideology: the blossoming of Confucianism as the official legal-governmental doctrine. This does not at all mean that contacts between China and the Japanese islands came under some particular intensification at this time. Quite the contrary, Shushi-gaku, the neo-Confucianism created by the Chinese thinker, Chu Hsi (1130-1200), had already reached Japan at the beginning of the fourteenth century and immediately became an object of interest for the court as well as for the Buddhist clergy. It did not, however, gain meaningful reception among the contemporary political elites and not until three centuries had passed - only at the start of the Tokugawa dynasty's reign - did the views of Chu Hsi attain the status of official state doctrine.

The centralizing aims of the Tokugawas were impeded by the political segmentation of the country and the extremely varied local customary law associated with it. The renaissance of Confucianism in the first half of the seventeenth century was stimulated by the development of the new socio-political order of

the bakuhan. Confucianism, with its vindication of powerful rule, universalism, and rationalism manifested itself as the natural ideological foundation for the creation of this system. For this reason, during the reign of the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu, bakufu decreed the Confucian division of society into four classes - samurai-overseers, peasants, craftsmen, and merchants - as legally binding. Recognizing the hierarchical class stratification as a natural trait of society, laws under the Tokugawas were addressed towards groups of people differing from one another in their functions within the state, treating the individual as a constituent element of one of the four social fractions of a specified status. In this manner a political system arose which was called "governing based on status" and which made control over its subjects incomparably more effective and more formalized than the direct personal rule which had characterized earlier military hegemonies.

Confucianism - which, in Japan, did not free itself from the guardianship of Buddhist monks until the seventeenth century - made a major contribution to the laying of the worldview foundations for a new systemic order. In an era of progressive political centralization when the

archaic customary norms had to give way to rationalized legal regulations, Confucianism filled in an ideological void which Buddhism was no longer able to mollify. The Confucian concept of loyalty with regards to supreme rule (chu), and with regards to family (ko), imbued fundamental social relationships with a universal character and, due to its paternalistic nature, answered the political aims of the Tokugawas in full because it legitimized the rigorous class segregation and supported the theory of the enlightened governments of the bushi. In turn, the abstract concepts of status-behaviour created patterns of conduct (do) for each class and profession, such as, for instance, bushido (samurai department) or chomindo (merchant department).

In 1640 a Portuguese ship came into Nagasaki. It was seized and later burned. Most of the members of the crew were executed and only about a dozen were set free so as to be able to tell others of the cruelty of the Japanese. From that time on the sole foreigners in Japan were the Dutch who were allowed to conduct trade on the diminutive island of Deshima at the entrance to the port of Nagasaki. The adoption of an isolationist policy by the Tokugawas meant a turning point in the

history of Japan, contrasting drastically with what was occurring in Europe as it then entered its period of great economic prosperity and geographic expansion. At the root of this voluntary self-isolation from the world lay, above all, aspirations of maintaining the internal stability of the new political system of bakuhan as well as a fear of the revolutionary effects of Christianity. The fear of Christianity was so strong in Japan that its rulers imposed strict censorship of any written Western word; for the whole period of the isolation, the Dutch merchants landing ashore were subject to the humiliating procedure of fumi-e, or "image trampling," which meant stomping on Christian holy pictures.

Many Japanese Confucianists, starting with Yamaga Soko (1622-1685), preached the concept that samurais had, by their very nature, a vocation to lead others, and that they had an obligation to take society under their protection, to direct it, and serve it as an example. Bushido, the honour code of the warrior caste, which the "Great Peace" had transformed into an administrative class, encompassed both praise for courage and other martial traits as well as affirmation of reason and erudition; in

this way it mitigated the internal contradiction contained in the very definition of "administrator-warrior." The regulations of bushido were aimed at reconciling two fundamentally different value systems: the old tradition of bushi as the fearless man of action, with the new ethos of leaders as persons marked by impeccable manners and a refined way of thinking. The tensions between these two components of the samurai's social role existed for the entire duration of the Tokugawa dynasty; gradually, however, military activity decreased in meaning succumbing to increasing marginalization. The bushido code placed bun (education) over bu (martial arts), creating a social climate conducive to educational development, thanks to which, in the mid-nineteenth century, the literacy rate reached 50 percent among men and 15 percent among women - surpassing, in this respect, England, the fatherland of the industrial revolution and the most developed country of Europe at that time.

THE PLURALISM OF THE TOKUGAWA PERIOD

The clash of Japan and the West in 1853 - after the invasion into the former's territorial

waters by four American warships under the charge of Commander Matthew Perry - meant the inglorious end of the Tokugawa isolation policy. It also triggered, as in the case of China over a decade earlier, the imposition of disproportionate international treaties, making the nation vulnerable to internal economic penetration (1858). The reaction of the Japanese to the threat upon their sovereignty was to rout bakuhan and replace it with a modern governmental apparatus, based to a significant degree on foreign models copied precisely from foreign powers. This swift and decisive reconstruction of the entire political system of the Japanese isles, faced with the lack of any mature reaction whatsoever on the part of neighbouring China towards this European occupation, comprises one of the most striking contrasts in world history. This disparity appears even more remarkable when we realize that the westernization of Japan in the nineteenth century was conducted at the initiative and under the control of the very same social group which a quarter of a millennium earlier had thrust it into isolation: over 90 percent of the first administrators of Meiji had belonged to the samurai class under

the Tokugawas.

The 1868 Japanese restoration of Meiji led to the overthrow of the antiquated Confucian regime while the 1864 Chinese restoration of Qing after the suppression of the Taiping rebellion meant - quite the opposite - the undisputed renunciation of any and all systemic innovations and an automatic return to the status quo ante. This gaping chasm between the Chinese and Japanese responses to the Western threat posed to their vital national interests explains, firstly, the divergence in the nature of the political elites in each of the two countries; secondly, the significant difference between their political systems; and thirdly and finally, the dissimilar place of Confucianism in the cultural systems of China and Japan.

The Chinese erudite-dignitaries (shen-shi), proclaiming the elementally ineffective policy of "self-teaching" and defending Confucianism with determination, were simultaneously guarding their privileged position in the state. The introduction of Western education would strike without mercy at the foundation of the raison d'etre of this powerful class whose meaning depended on guarding Confucian wisdom and

transferring it to its descendants. Chinese bureaucrats were therefore, in essence, a conservative group condemned to one ideology, in contrast with the Japanese samurais who owed their position to aristocratic descent and who could just as easily have become Buddhists, Shintoists, or even Christians without losing political power in the new system. This is the reason why the program of modernization in China was, in contrast with the situation in Japan, the idea of only a handful of administrators who were aware of the dimensions of the nation's underdevelopment and were capable of thinking beyond categories of caste.

The differences between the two political systems were also not without meaning for their chances of modernization. Hence, political relations between bakufu, the duchies, and the Japanese emperor (deprived of real authority by the shogunate) were far more complex and dynamic than the unitarian system of China. Bakufu, however powerful and influential, had to take the authority of the emperor into account, and also permit a certain level of autonomy for the "external hans," the duchies whose lords had the same political status as the Tokugawa dynasty during the times of the military dictatorship of

Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1590-1598). Thus it is not strange that the duchy of Choshu defined the basic principles of its policy in the following manner: "loyalty to the monarch, faithfulness to the bakufu, and submission to the ancestors." This clearly underlined the pluralistic character of the Japanese system of rule. In a crisis situation, this pluralistic rule permitted the samurais to transfer their political loyalty from the bakufu to the emperor, something which hastened the process of the system's structural transformation and brought it under institutional control. The case in China was different: based on a simple unitarian model where the emperor constituted the single centre of political power, overthrow of the Confucian tradition had to entail chaos and the vanquishing of that tradition in general.

Pluralism was not only a characteristic of the Tokugawa political system, but also of the very ideology of power. Japan, contrary to China and Korea, never instituted a Confucian system of examinations for shogunate administrators and did not recognize the teachings of any one of the schools as the official instruction of state doctrine. The decentralized system in the

archipelago made the Confucian academies dependent upon the lords who founded them, and not the shogun in Tokyo. By this token, it automatically obliterated any chances of elaborating a uniform orthodoxy, and stimulated internal variations of ideas in the womb of Confucianism. This freedom in scholarly inquiry, unknown in either China or Korea, did, in time, turn against Confucianism - it facilitated the development of the kokugaku, "national education," which regenerated and led to the proliferation of the pre-Chinese tradition and religion of Japan.

THE RENAISSANCE OF SHINTOISM

Just as the beginning of the seventeenth century was a period of Confucian advancement, so the second half of the nineteenth century ran its course under the sign of the dynamic development of Shintoism. Just as Confucianism turned out to be a crucial component of bakuhan, so Shintoism formed the ideological foundations for the renewed empire. The efforts of a few scholars, interested in the native classics, to revive the Shinto religion in the Japanese islands naturally came much before the restoration of Meiji and began at the turn of the seventeenth

century. The restoration of the empire after the overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate united the scattered scholarly undertakings, continued by several generations of historians (though barely tolerated by the political authorities), into a compact ideological whole and transformed them into an official state doctrine.

The beginnings of Shinto (literally: "ways of the Gods"), the sole autochthonous religion of Japan, vanish in the obscurities of history. Shintoism was born some three thousand years ago as a conglomerate of independent local beliefs which, as the result of later interaction, gradually succumbed to a process of modification and uniformization until, in the first millennium before Christ, they were transformed into a consolidated religious system. At the turn of the era there were already temples and chaplains of Shinto who were passing on the oral tradition of myths, prayers, incantations, and sacred rites from generation to generation. This tradition was set down in writing in the ninth century, three centuries after Buddhism and Confucianism had reached the Japanese islands and, along with them, the Chinese pictograms which instigated the literary Japanese language. The oldest mentions regarding Shintoist

religious beliefs appear somewhat earlier: in the dynastic chronicles, *Kojiki* (The Book of Ancient Events) of 712, and *Nihongi* (The Japanese Chronicle) of 720.

Despite the domination of Buddhism for over a millennium - from the rule of Prince Shotoku until the development of Confucianism at the beginning of the seventeenth century - the Shinto religion maintained its original meaning to a great degree and influenced the inhabitants of the archipelago through its widespread and continually expanding network of temples in which the emperor himself fulfilled the function of preeminent chaplain, regularly visiting in Ise the sanctuary of his ancestress, Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun. Furthermore, following the example of the emperor's home, the majority of the samurai families maintained a temple to their ancestors, expressing in this way their respect for the honour of their clan. At lower levels of society, sanctuaries to guardian gods for each village, town, or district comprised an important factor internally uniting the countless local communities. Even the Tokugawa clan, which legitimized its political power on the basis of Confucianism, erected splendid mausoleums in honour of the first shogun, in the

provinces as well as in the capital. In 1645 the culminating religious event of the history of the bakuhan took place: the third shogun, Iemitsu "placed the soul of Ieyasu" in the Toshogu temple on Mount Nikko. Henceforth, until the fall of the shogunate, each subsequent shogun, accompanied by the daimyo and their entourages, made an official pilgrimage to Nikko in all pomp and glory.

In time, the isolation policy imposed upon the country by the Tokugawas engendered a deep feeling of "Japaneseness" which naturally strengthened the Shinto tradition, ultimately leading to its great dominance, pushing Chinese cultural borrowings aside and into the background. The first distinguished precursor of kokugaku - "national knowledge" - was the Buddhist monk, Keichi (1640-1701), the consummate expert on classical Japanese poetry. His research into native literary classics quickly transformed into an interest in the history of Japan and Japanese national institutions, including the empire and - in connection with that - the original religion of the archipelago. And so, in 1715, as a result of over a dozen years of arduous work by several scholars clustered around Prince Mitsukuni, the

243-scroll Great History of Japan appeared. The meaning of this work in the birth of a Shintoist-nationalist ideology cannot be underestimated; furthermore, for long years afterwards, it placed Mito - the domain of Prince Mitsukuni - in the forefront of the battle to overthrow the shogunate. Also contributing to the rising wave of nationalism was Kamo Mabuchi (1697-1769), the elucidator of the old prayers - the norito - who assigned the blame for all of Japan's misfortunes on Chinese influences, especially Buddhism and Confucianism. Kamo Mabuchi's pupil, Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) devoted over 30 years to the reconstruction of the original version of the Kojiki chronicles. He also produced the monumental work Kojiki-den (Commentary to the Book of Ancient Events), published posthumously in 44 volumes, attacking everything and anything which was foreign, glorifying "Japaneseness," and stressing the divinity of the imperial dynasty.

The extensive efforts of Norinaga yielded a wondrous harvest. In less than 70 years after the appearance of the Kojiki-den, the Meiji Constitution was proclaimed, shaping Japan into an absolute monarchy and designating the monarch

as the foundation of Japanese sovereignty. The idea of the divine nature of the emperor - complete with its whole Shintoist justification - was drawn from the most ancient layers of written history in the Kojiki and Nihongi periods. Systematized anew and appropriately modified, it was again to serve the consolidation of the entire nation around the throne of the eternal dynasty descended from the goddess, Amaterasu. The Meiji Constitution was preceded by two important legal acts: the 1868 Decree Separating Shinto from Buddhism, cleansing Shinto of foreign augmentations and added syncretic strata, as well as the 1882 restitution of Shintoism, as a result of which priests of this religion were placed in the employ of the national government and thus under the jurisdiction of the central administration.

The Meiji Constitution not only sanctioned the absolute power of the Japanese emperor but it also substantiated the religious myths and beliefs which contributed to the foundation of a cult of the monarch perceived as the most sacred symbol of national identity. The "reborn Shinto" (fukko-shinto) did, however, reduce the meaning of the ancient gods, pushing the motif of the "divinity of the empire and the imperial house"

into the foreground. These tendencies were further strengthened at the beginning of the twentieth century. Shintoism then transmuted into Tennoism (from tenno, "emperor" in Japanese) and lost many traits characteristic of sensu stricto religious cults. Moreover, fukko-shinto firmly implanted the conviction that the Japanese were the most homogeneous and exceptional nation in the world; since the roots of their genealogical tree reached the times of chaos, so they constituted (together with the islands born of the gods) one holy family. Mutual relations in the centre of this temporal tribe mirrored the relationships of superiority and inferiority existing between particular deities in the Shintoist pantheon from whom all the inhabitants of the archipelago had descended. Succinctly put, the social stratification of the empire found its political legitimization in the stratification of the supernatural world. Thus the Meiji Restoration did not rout the hierarchy in Japan but only greatly simplified it. The five-layered Confucian-type pyramid of bakufu times: shogun - samurais - peasants - craftsmen - merchants was replaced by the tripartite Tennoist pyramid: emperor - bureaucrats - the masses which, in

accordance with the reformers' expectations, turned out to be an effective tool in the mobilization of the masses in the process of building a modern industrial society.¹¹

TRADITION AND MODERNIZATION

The slogan of the Meiji reformers was *fukoku-kyohei* - "enrich the country and strengthen its military potential" - so as to avoid the fate of China and eliminate the threat of the West. The condition for saving the sovereignty of the Archipelago was rapid modernization, and this assumed the overthrow of the antiquated political system in conjunction with assimilation of western scientific-technological achievements. Until the deposition of the shogunate, Japan was a self-sufficient

¹¹ It would be worth adding that the ideas of the Meiji politicians were in accordance with the opinion of an outside expert: upon the request of Prince Ito Hirobumi, the author of the proposed constitution of 1889 was one of the first sociologists, Herbert Spencer. After long talks with the messengers of the prince regarding the planned modernization of Japan, Spencer set down his cogitations and forwarded them to Ito. Regarding social hierarchy, the English evolutionist felt that the traditionally sanctioned duties towards those of higher ranking, especially the emperor, formed a suitable institutional framework, and great possibilities for executing a far-reaching systemic transformation without tumbling into the troubles unavoidable in the case of more individualistic and egalitarian societies.

agricultural nation, curbed and controlled by Confucian institutions. Forcing the industrialization and urbanization of the country required repudiating that rigid, agrarian system of classes and replacing it with a system more flexible and adaptable to the social mobility compelled by capitalistic production relations.

The paradox of Meiji modernization lay in the fact that it comprised the restoration of the ancient order, a return to the antediluvian past. The traditional Confucian order of the shogunate was attacked in the name of a transcendental monarchic might, legitimizing itself with an even older tradition - one that was indigenously Japanese! New regimes were based on recognition of the "divine and unapproachable power" of the emperor, "of the dynasty which has ruled perpetually through all the ages" (Article 1, Constitution of 1889), and the emperor himself was placed above the governmental apparatus and beyond contemporary political battles. It would be difficult to recognize the Meiji Revolution as any sort of a political revolution as it did not go beyond the borders of the ruling class - that is, the samurai class - and it implied a typical

Japanese loyalty to superiors, as well as to archaic political values whose continuity remained unsevered. In other words, the Meiji coup led only to one traditional hierarchical order being supplanted by another traditional hierarchical order - though one which facilitated the effective mobilization of the mass populace and, in addition, the top controlled modernization of the nation.

The modernization of Japan at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was conducted by a meritocratic elite which stalwartly held the helm of the national government and did not, for even a moment, relinquish control over the internal transformations. Amongst its members were the ancient aristocracy and higher civil bureaucracy (*mombatsu*), the military bureaucracy (*gumbatsu*), and the leaders of the conservative political parties and great financial bourgeoisie (*zaibatsu*). These powerful, cooperating power holders placed their bets on swift industrial development, especially of heavy industry, foregoing the intrinsic agricultural interests of their country. At the root of this strategy lay premises of a military nature: Japan felt threatened by the expansion of the Western powers and aimed to defend its

sovereignty by creating a modern economy and defence industry.

Investments in heavy industry were accompanied by not less important investments in the educational system. From 1868 to 1902 over 11,000 Japanese students went abroad to study in Europe or the United States, and in 1870, the six-year period of mandatory universal education was introduced. Furthermore, in yet other areas of life, Westernization was advancing at a dizzying rate. Hence, in 1871 a national postal service and the first telegraph lines connecting Tokyo and Osaka were established; a year later a railway line was constructed between Tokyo and Yokohama. Concurrently, Japan accepted the Gregorian calendar. And in 1873, a decree regarding mandatory military service was proclaimed: of epochal significance, it effaced the ageless distinction between the samurai and the commoner. Nevertheless, thanks to this, Japan was able, in the course of a few years, to create a powerful draft army modelled after European patterns of recruitment, training, and organization.

The Meiji modernization turned out to be an amazingly successful union of Western knowledge

and institutions with traditional Eastern political conceptions. The philosophy of government embodied in the 1889 Constitution was based on principles which had been, since prehistoric times, perceived as the essence of Japanese sovereignty. It recognized the emperor as an absolute and irreproachable ruler - the divine incarnation of nationhood itself, situated above and beyond the government and the parliament. Moreover, the political philosophy of Meiji still treated Confucianism - unseated two decades earlier as a system of social knowledge and system of politics - as the immovable moral foundation and school of loyalty for subordinates, which was unquestionably recalled in the imperial 1890 document regarding education.

In the course of a brief, 40-year period, Japan transformed itself from a backward, defenseless archipelago into a modern industrial power which easily overpowered China and Russia. At the basis of this metamorphosis lay two factors: the replacement of the inflexible, agrarian Confucian system with the more supple Tennoist system, and the deposition of the traditional Confucian attitude towards the world in favour of Shintoist activism.

According to Confucianism, the world functions properly only when ideal harmony reigns among all the elements of the cosmos and when reproduction of nature takes place undisturbed. Man is an extension and the crowning element of nature; thus his actions have a fundamental effect on what happens in the world. Human behaviour either reinforces the cosmic balance (when that behaviour is in accord with the patterns set once and for all), or they threaten that balance (when behaviour veers from those patterns); in any case, the consequences of human actions extend beyond the individual or even group realm of responsibility. That is why the most important Confucian virtue is moderation in everything and aspiration to maintain the world as it is.

Referring to Confucian teachings, Chinese conservatives argued at the close of the nineteenth century that mines, railways, factories, and telegraph lines would destroy the harmony between man and nature; would disturb the peace of the ancestors; would deprive craftsmen, porters, and carriers of work; and would make the country dependent upon foreign knowledge and machines. They also staunchly held the thesis of the essential nature of

agriculture as the basis for the country's profits and denounced trade, including foreign, as unethical and nonproductive action. The case in Japan was different as the conservative Confucian worldview lost its meaning as quickly as the reborn Shintoism - promoted in 1882 to official state religion - gained strength. The place of Confucianism was taken by activism derived from ancient cosmological myths of the Archipelago and the oldest sources of written history.

According to traditional Japanese cosmogony, the demiurges sent down by the heavenly gods to create the world never completed their task. This duty was passed on to their descendants, and later to the descendants of those descendants who, until the present day, are bound by an obligation to continue creating the world. As they share common ancestors, all the Japanese are related to one another and upon each one of them without exception rests the burden of bringing to fruition the work of their forefathers: to lead the Japanese isles - created by the gods - to a state of perfection. In this activist concept of Shintoism there is no differentiation between greater and smaller roles. In the collective project of bringing the

world to its completion, each person fulfills an essential task. Each person is a gear without which the entire complicated social machinery of the archipelago would not be able to function properly. Out of this collectivistic activism arises the fundamental ethical principle of Shinto: the moral principle of judging an act not by its intention, but rather by its consequences. This, popularized in the Japanese empire in the second half of the nineteenth century (as it had been a few centuries earlier in Europe), was a concept of the world as an unfinished whole and an activist concept of the human as he who continues the divine act of creation.¹²

The concept of an uninterrupted succession of generations led the Japanese to the belief that they were the most homogeneous and privileged nation in the world; together with the Archipelago, also created of the gods, they comprised one holy family. The sons of Japan were a chosen people, divine and close to the

¹² Some analogies between Christianity and Shintoism are striking. Both these religions place a strong accent on work ethic and both present the divine protoplasts of man as creators, workers. Genesis shows God as a gardener planting trees in the Garden of Eden; Kojiki states that the first imperial rice fields were worked by the sun goddess Amaterasu herself.

gods, and, as such, encumbered by the mission of reshaping the world, and the mission of ordering their environment. God's children inherited a portion of the tasks which their parents had had to execute. Hence, the supernatural ancestors were responsible for that which they had assigned their offspring, and the latter could not shirk their duties as obedience towards one's parents was an elementary responsibility of children. Shintoism, therefore, in proclaiming the thesis that each islander is a cog in the divine machine creating the world, inculcated the Japanese with habits of self-denial and self-discipline - in other words, the ethics of collective activism.

The work of building the Japanese islands, as taught by Shinto, must be completed. Thus new detachments arise and will arise of those who would create the world. And though in their lifetime they are not treated like gods, they leave a piece of themselves materialized in their creations; they draw nearer to the gods via their world-creating actions. Posthumously the Japanese become gods, kami, inasmuch as their lives leave some permanent trace on earth. As kami they will take care of their progeny on earth from the next world and, in this way,

continue to participate in the ordering of the archipelago. In short, even death is not capable of freeing the true Shintoist of his responsibility to work for his homeland!

These same historical events - the aggressive expansion of the West and the humiliation of unequal treaties - evoked completely different reactions in China than those which ensued in Japan. First of all, China rigidly and uncompromisingly held onto Confucian tradition until the first quarter of the twentieth century. No other autochthonous tradition was able to defy it; the pre-Confucian culture had been destroyed by the "fire and iron" of the Qin dynasty in the period of unification. Secondly, two great attempts at modernization in the empire - the Republican Revolution and the Communist Revolution - ended in great defeats because they had found no support in the country's own native tradition. Sun Yat-Sen attempted to transfer over the political models of individualistic bourgeoisie culture, the product of Western Protestantism, onto the backward, collectivistic, and 98 percent peasant population of China. Mao Tse-Tung - applying the Soviet model - aimed, in turn, to transform the three millennia old, archaic agricultural economy into one of the leading industrial systems of the world at lightning speed.

Sun Yat-Sen's revolution led to political catastrophe; Mao Tse-Tung's revolution led to an economic one. The result of the former was chaos and the disintegration of China into sovereign military domains. The result of the latter - the Great Leap Forward - was famine and the devastation of the apparatus of a productive nation.

THE KOREA'S PLIGHT IN THE NINETEENH CENTURY

Korea under the late Choson dynasty is often compared with Tokugawa Japan. Both neighbouring countries reached the climax of their Confucianisation between mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, and both forcefully cut themselves off from the external world sinking in this period into unically tight isolation. This suggestive comparison is, however, only partially true, and rather misleading than truly seminal idea. Upon the encounter with the West, Japan was much stronger than Korea, being more economically prosperous, better politically, and military organized, as well as more institutionally flexible since less committed to the Confucian tradition. Last but not least, Japanese scholars possessed some vast, and decent knowledge of the Western material achievements called rangaku - "Dutch Learning", while

the Korean cultural elites were almost totally ignorant of the huge technological gap separating them from Europe and the United States.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Japan was a country completely different from what it had been in the year 1600 when the Tokugawa shogunate was established after the Battle of Sekigahara. Two hundred fifty years of this clan's governing had assured the Japanese islands significant material, and economic development despite the rigorous policy of isolation (sakoku). The "Great Peace" (taihei), as the Edo period was later known, allowed Japan to overcome the negative consequences of earlier civil wars, and facilitated expansion of the government administration, rapid demographic growth, and development of dynamic urban centers, especially Edo and Osaka. Under the reigns of the Tokugawas, the level of wealth of all four classes had been considerably augmented, especially that of the townspeople, since the official position of bakufu which played down the importance of trade, stood in glaring contrast with the actual practice of economic activity.

In the Edo era, as in earlier periods, political authority remained in the hands of the military aristocracy, which constituted the unique feature of Japanese Confucianism. Nonetheless, the lifestyle and way of thinking of the samurai class did succumb to a radical shift. Samurai became, above all, the firm bureaucratic elite which integrated and improved the efficiency of the former country's administrative apparatus. Confucian rules and regulations paired with austere military ethics significantly simplified interpersonal relationships, made clear the duties and responsibilities of the various estates, and built a new political philosophy which placed emphasis on an unswerving loyalty of subjects to their superiors while concurrently stressing the obligation of governors to ensure the contentment of their people.

Japan had two superior - and to some extent complimentary - authorities, the shogunate in Edo and the imperial dynasty in Kyoto, and what follows, more than the neighbouring Chinese, and Koreans institutional space for political shifts within the scope of indigenous tradition. Moreover, Japan, unlike Korea and Vietnam, was never a truly tributary China's state, and as an insular country engulfed by

the seas remained to a great degree outside of the Middle Kingdom's centripetal attraction. The Japanese also, contrary to the Chinese and Koreans, never set up a rigid Confucian system of examinations and did not recognized any of the schools as the official or binding statecraft.

Japan's seclusion was also less impervious as that of Korea. The Japanese traded regularly throughout the Tokugawa period with the European power, the Netherlands, via small islet Deshima near Nagasaki, and in 1811 the shogunate itself founded an office for the translation of Occidental books, which in 1857, under the name of Institute for the Investigation of Barbarian Books, became a center of Western knowledge and languages. Similar schools were established as well by some of the larger domains, notably Mito, and Choshu in Honshu, Tosa in Shikoku, Satsuma, and Saga in Kyushu. The scholars of "Dutch learning", as the Japanese experts on Western civilization came to be known, were fully aware that the Archipelago's naval power was no match for the foreign fleets, and what follows, that the blind resistance to the Western world would sooner or later lead to national catastrophe. Their voices were not inconsequential, since the articulated menace of the West eventually drawn the shogunate's attention to

Dutch as well as British sciences and, above all, European military equipment, skills, and organization. In a word, the early stage of the Japanese modernization preceded the rise of the Meiji regime by several decades.

The Korean Shirhak - "Practical learning" - scholars were merely a pale reflection of the Japanese "Dutch learning" experts. Their fragmentary knowledge was of the second hand nature and came from China upon infrequent tributary missions. Shirhak scholars' efforts to scrutinize the foreign powers intruding East Asia did not enjoy the state's interest, not to mention the Choson sponsorship. Even the young yangban intellectuals' insistent voices gradually growing louder as time went on were flatly ignored by the court and the mighty literati groups. In consequence, the Korean political elites had not the vaguest idea how overwhelming foreign military and technological power they were soon to face, and what follows, the formidable Choson ruler, the Taewongun, took the occasional skirmishes with the French and American gunboats (in 1866 and 1871 respectively) for a heartening victory of the Confucian statecraft over Western barbarians. Taewongun's myopic seclusion policy was and at odds with the spirit of time bearing in mind the fact that even big China and

militaristic Japan had already opened their ports to the West in 1840s and 1850s.

Clashing with the Western powers, the Korean state was much weaker, stagnant and anachronistic than the Tokugawa shogunate. Foreigners found the Choson dynasty close to the lowest point in its five centuries' history. Throughout much of the nineteenth century Korea had no strong king, only a succession of child monarchs, being torn by the endless factional struggles of mighty yangban clans. As a result of the internal feuding, large portion of the gentry class finding itself excluded from public offices diverted its energies into expanding private riches either at the state's or peasants' expense. The ages-long Confucian examinations system reached its nadir as the dominant faction within the court notoriously manipulated the results, pushing the administrative institutions into increasing disarray.

The nineteenth century witnessed also a period of sharp decline in Korean economy. Agricultural production, base of the nation's livelihood, plummeted causing many farmers to escape into primitive slash-and-burn cultivation in the mountains. The country was plagued by peasant poverty and rebellions which the state bureaucracy failed to

alleviate by appropriate means of economic growth. Unable to endure the rapacious exploitation the desperate commoners, often under the leadership of fallen yanbans killed local functionaries, set fire to government buildings, and wrought havoc, especially in the southern provinces. Popular uprisings began in 1811 and came and went throughout the rest of the century culminating in the Tonghak movement of the 1860s, which finally brought about a major peasant war in the 1890s and triggered the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895.

The Korean elites of the nineteenth century, unlike that of Japan, were not mentally disposed to cope with the aggressive West properly, being as much as the Chinese committed to the glorious Confucian tradition. The ruling class in Korea deeply believed that nothing could be learned from any other country but China, and firmly followed this conviction. Its ignorance of the Western civilization was directly proportional to its cultural disdain of the foreign barbarians. The Choson court was thus on the whole against radical change and suspicious about those open minded intellectuals who looked across the sea to Japan to seek patterns of modernization. In a sense, the Korean bureaucracy was more papal than the pope himself, preserving for example anachronistic

examinations system, inculcating an outworn orthodoxy, until 1915-1918, a decade longer than in China. The Taewongun had a simple foreign policy indeed: no trade, no contacts with the West, no Catholics, and no Japanese ideas. One of his widely esteemed ideologues, Yi Hang-no, wrote in his memorial of 1866 that any relations with Western barbarians would be equal to abandoning the values on which all true civilization rests, thereby causing man to sink to the level of animal behaviour. Similar ideas echoed in the programme of the rebellious Tonghak movement. The four-point manifesto proclaimed by Chon Pong-Jun in 1894 called among others for eliminating the Japanese and restoring the Way of the Confucian Sages.

Last but not least, the nineteenth century Korea, unlike Japan, had no commercial cities and no merchant class worthy of the name. State officials' basic instinct in dealing with foreign trade was either to cut it off or to grant a monopoly on it to a favoured political ally. Broad commerce would mean less control of the ruling bureaucracy, rise of a new wealthy class, alternatives for the peasantry and threat to the social order based on tradition and ritual. Thus, Korean trade with China was occasional and carried on as part of tribute missions, trade

with Japan - cut down to a bare minimum and went exclusively via Tsushima Island. As result, upon the encounter with the West, Korea was the least commercial society of the East Asian nations.

All in all, in the mid-nineteenth century the Korean Peninsula was much less prepared than the Japanese Archipelago to cope with massive intrusions of Western powers, led by Great Britain, striving to impose upon East Asia their predatory international system of commerce either by the means of aggressive diplomacy or, if necessary, by war and other forcible methods.

THE KOREAN REACTIONS TO THE WESTERN INTRUSIONS

Until the mid-nineteenth century East Asia remained a world of its own, separated from the rest of the globe and very little affected indeed by the expansive civilization of the West. Within this Sinocentric realm Korea occupied a unique place being the most Confucian of all societies outside the Chinese heartland. Its ruling elite eagerly embraced, especially during the Choson dynasty (1392-1910), the Chinese moral system as well as Chinese political institutions and considered the Middle Kingdom the only source of enlightenment and civilization. The

government in Seoul for its foreign relations relied entirely on Beijing, however, as an independent authority within the Sinocentric world it kept even the Sino-Korean border along the Yalu river tightly closed. Despite China's titular superiority there was not a single Chinese official stationed in the Korean Peninsula.

It was specifically forbidden for Korea's citizens to have any contacts with other nations and even relatively well-traveled Koreans who were part of embassies going to China surprised Europeans as far more xenophobic than the Chinese. "Little Middle Kingdom," as Koreans often referred to their country, became finally more Sinocentric than the Middle Kingdom itself. Korea's seclusion policy was partly a reaction to foreign intrusions, but above all reflected its economic autarky, national pride, and its highly-valued place within the Chinese world order. This all-embracing, self-imposed seclusion was effectively strengthened by Korea's geographical isolation. The Peninsula was several hundred miles to the north of the Western trade routes which extended from the Indian Ocean to Canton in southern China and to the Dutch trading post at Nagasaki in Japan. As a result, Korea was the last of the Confucian states to

become open to Western contacts and it was not until 1894 that it began its "modernization" in earnest.

The Koreans, unlike the Japanese, totally identified themselves with the Chinese civilization and considered it their own. While main Japan's cultural achievements came from a departure from Chinese patterns, those of Korea - quite the opposite - came clearly from its development within the Middle Kingdom's tradition. Japan, as a matter of fact, has never been a truly Confucian state, even during the Tokugawa regime, or to put it more precisely: Japan has never been a Confucian state to that extent as Korea or Vietnam was. The Japanese marked by their forceful insular worldview and pre-Chinese vivid tradition, living for seven centuries under military, shogunal rule at odds with the genuine Confucian statecraft have usually kept themselves aloof from the continent, and throughout most of their history rejected China's tributary status. Pragmatic and militaristically disciplined, when the time came found themselves ready indeed "to break off with the bad company of East Asia," to quote again Fukuzawa Yukichi, and were the only nation in the region mentally capable to emulate the West in the nineteenth century.

Clashing with the predatory Western powers, the Korean Peninsula clung to the Chinese patterns and Seoul's major response to the alien and despised world aimed at strengthening and rectifying traditional Confucian institutions which by no means could hinder the expansion of the West. The main thrust of the Taewongun's reforms tended to reach double objective: repelling barbarians as well as renovating strong Confucian state. Koreans revered Chinese culture, and were stubbornly committed to an obsolete Sinic order, remaining unable to grasp new international relations of the changing world. Simply speaking, they were not disposed to reject "old ways of the Great Sages" in the name of progress, as the Japanese did, while the once powerful Chinese empire was not in a position any more to protect its loyal "little brother" from disastrous foreign peril.

The Japanese pragmatic reasoning advocating Westernization was nullified by Korean moral arguments. "Rich country, and strong army," said Pak Kyu-su, an influential Choson scholar and statesman, may be Japan's new slogan, but the wealth and genuine power of a nation come from its moral rectitude, not from show of sheer force. "The Japanese who come today", preached another Confucian from the Peninsula, Ch'oe Ik-hyon, are wearing Western

clothes, are using Western cannons, and are sailing upon Western ships; this indeed is clear proof that the Japanese and the Westerners are the same." So, any rapprochement with the Archipelago, Ch'oe went on, would be equal with an unstoppable series of calamities. It would mean the exchange of Korean daily necessities for that of Japan, more Japanese running hither and thither up and down the country, and more defiled Korean women. For all these evils there was the only cure: keeping the Japanese out of the Peninsula, since they turn out to be "wild animals that solely crave material goods, and are totally ignorant of human morality."¹³

Apart from the staunch conservative attitude towards the West typical on the whole of the court and majority of the literati there were some small Korean intellectual circles advocating a sort of progressive response to the foreign powers. As early as the late eighteenth century, the Shirak scholar, Pak Che-ga, had argued in favour of establishing trade relations with the Western countries as a means to strengthen the nation. Among those who shared this view were Ch'oe Han-gi, the author of the book entitled Descriptions of the Nations of the World (18--), a

¹³ See: J. Palais *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*, Cambridge Mass. 1975, pp. 264-265 and M. Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea*, Seattle 1977, p. 43.

government interpreter O Kyong-sok, who visited China many times, and a Buddhist monk, Yu Tae-ch'i. All of them demanded the end of Korea's seclusion policy and the borrowing of the Western cultural items for the betterment of the nation. When the French and American intrusions took place these scholars became ever more convinced that the Choson state could no longer maintain the status quo and remain the Hermit Kingdom. However, the Taewongun and the majority of yangban class rejected this idea and were determined to keep the Korea's doors closed to the West, raising to the level of the state ideology what they called ch'oksa - "rejection of heterodoxy". As a result, the period of Regency was totally lost for any real attempts at modernizing the country and bringing it a bit closer to the rapidly developing world.

In the nineteenth century Korea was quite remote country laying far away from the main Western trading routes and as a matter of fact both Europe and America had relatively little interest in dominating it. For the Japanese, however, the Hermit Kingdom was the closest neighbour and a natural direction of their expansion as they grew stronger and became more self-confident. So, it was Japan, and not any Western power, which opened Korea for the external world and this is the other side of the coin of the

Archipelago's modernization. It certainly was not an accident that Prince Ito Hirobumi, a key figure and the shining symbol of Japanese Westernization became in 1905 a person who played the principal role in the Japan's act of naked aggression against the Choson state and as a hated symbol of foreign oppression was assassinated in 1909 by a Korean patriot.

Having toppled the Tokugawa shogunate the Meiji leaders took an increasingly aggressive stance towards Korea for several reasons: the economic motive of acquiring a captive foreign market for Japanese goods, the strategic idea of preempting Russians' attempts at political and military penetrating of the Korean Peninsula, the necessity of creating an outlet for military activities of the group of disgruntled samurais. In late January 1876 the mission led by General Kuroda Kiyotaka, escorted by a fleet consisting of six warships and 800 troops arrived in the Kanghwa Bay near Seoul. It was a clear copy of America's Commander Matthew Perry gunboats diplomacy in the Tokyo Bay that had opened Japan some twenty years before.

The Kuroda mission turned out to be no less effective then that of Comandor Perry. As the diligent disciples of the West, the Japanese succeeded quickly

in imposing upon Korea what they had learned from Western barbarians: a predatory unequal treaty. The most crucial of the Kanghwa Treaty twelve articles proclaimed that Korea, being "an autonomous (chaju) state, possessed the same sovereign rights as Japan". The hidden objective behind this declaration was to pave the way for the future Japanese aggression without provoking a military reaction from China, which for long centuries enjoyed unchallenged suzerainty over Korea. In addition, the treaty opened three Korean ports, Pusan, Wonsan, and Inchon, and permitted Japanese settlements in these cities, granting the foreign settlers extraterritorial privileges without securing reciprocal benefits for Koreans in Japan. Moreover, Korea exposed its domestic market to Japanese commercial penetration by accepting the proposal for the mutual tariff moratorium. Briefly speaking, by the Kanghwa Treaty of 1876 the Japanese managed to impose upon the Peninsula all the most predatory features of unequal international relations which Western powers had dictated China and Japan in the 1840s and 1850s respectively.

The Kanghwa Treaty was followed by the Korean-American agreement of 1883, and generally similar Choson state's treaties with Great Britain and

Germany (1883), Italy and Russia (1884), France (1886), and Austria-Hungary (1889). Finally, Korea was fully caught in a trap of unequal treaties and from that time on its leaders could not shape the nations' fate as they wished. At the end of nineteenth century the Korean Peninsula was increasingly a playground for the foreign powers and even the king himself had to move from one legation to another in order to secure his residual authority.

The three decades which elapsed between signing the Kanghwa Treaty and the Japanese protectorate imposed upon Korea in 1905, after the Russo-Japanese war, were marked by two contradictory trends in Korean domestic politics: bold and sometimes heroic efforts at modernizing the country undertaken by open-minded intellectuals and the stubborn conservative opposition to these efforts led by traditional scholars and state officials. In such circumstances no Meiji-like Westernization could be achieved, at best - a pale reflection of China's "self-strengthening movement". As a result, Korea torn by conflicting ideologies, unable to espouse tradition with modernity as the Japanese did, was gradually sinking in chaos and internal strife. It certainly would be an oversimplification to say that in this period no reforms of the nation's economy and social

institutions were furthered by the government and private agents, but in the end it proved to be too late and too limited to stop the increasing military penetration coming from Japan. In 1910 Korea fell an easy prey to the rising Japanese imperialism and lost altogether for next 35 years any chance to shape its own future.

