Abstract

Huang Zhun-xian (黄遵宪), reformer, diplomat, poet and historian, was one of the earliest Chinese in the late nineteenth century who suggested China to learn from Japan in her pursuit of national wealth and power.

Huang's perceptions of the government and society of Japan, his assessment of Japanese strengths and weaknesses, his proposals for "Japanizing" China and his rationale behind the "learn-from-Japan" movement are detailed in his "magnum opus", the Riben Guozhi (日本国志) or History of Japan.

A secretary on the diplomatic staff of He Ru-zhang (何如璋), Qing (Manchu) government's first minister to Japan, Huang Zhun-xian arrived in Tokyo in 1877, ten years after the Meiji Restoration. Impressed and inspired by the new looks, new ideas and new modernisation programmes of Meiji Japan, he was quick to probe the Japanese success story. Through personal observations and contacts with a network of Japanese scholar-friends, Huang proceeded to collect information, arrange materials, pierce ideas together to write the Riben Guozhi only two years after his arrival. But the project took him more than ten years to complete, mainly due to disruptions by career responsibilities and job transfers.

The Riben Guozhi had had a considerable impact on the Reformist Movement led by Kang You-wei and Liang Qi-qiao and the reforms carried out in the final years of the Qing dynasty. But when Japanese imperialism in China intensified and anti-Japanese sentiments upsurged during the first few decades of the twentieth century, the idea of "learning from Japan" was not well received, and Huang's ideas were not heeded if not altogether forgotten.

In view of the global trend to study the Japanese experience today, it is important as well as justifiable to reexamine Huang's ideas in the Riben Guozhi. Why and how did Japan achieve her success? And in which areas should China learn from Japan? These and other questions that Huang asked almost a century ago may still have com-
temporary relevance. Some of his questions are the same questions of our own. The call for "learning from Japan" still reverberates. Therefore, it seems justifiable to reexamine and reevaluate Huang's ideas in the Riben Guozhi. And that is the purpose of this Academic Exercise.

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