ABSTRACT

China’s Self-Strengthening Movement and Japan’s Meiji Restoration are their respective first modernization in the nineteenth-century. Though both modernizations aim to learn from the West, the vast differences in the effectiveness and advancement can be significantly seen from the outcome of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). Through comparison, this thesis seeks to determine the underlying reasons that constitute the failure of the Self-Strengthening Movement and the success of Japan’s modernization. The comparison will focus on their common cause of the modernization, political characteristics, cultural origins, scope and planning of their transformation.

China’s Self-Strengthening Movement started in 1860 while Japan’s Meiji Restoration began in 1868. This close period in both countries’ modernizations was not coincidental. It was during this period that the western countries began their colonizations. Upon being encroached, both China and Japan experienced the powerful impact from the west, and realised the need to learn from them. There were also the internal chaos that partly caused these westernization attempts to arise.

The government plays an important role in the modernization of the country. Due to different personalities and political experience, Dowager Ci Xi (慈禧太后) and Meiji Emperor (明治天皇) have different attitudes towards modernization and autocracy. Political rivalry in China’s bureaucratic government also proved to be a hindrance to its modernization process, whereas the cooperation of the Meiji leaders helped to accelerate the Meiji Restoration.
There is a close relation between the political characteristics of the two movements and the cultural origins and education systems of the two countries. China’s early years of cultural superiority and the Imperial Examinations (科举) closed up the thinking of the Qing officials. In contrast, Japan experienced a long period of cultural inferiority, and with the help of the early western studies during the Tokugawa period, it enabled the Japanese to increase their acceptance of the more superior culture.

The different attitudes towards Western culture in turn affected the Chinese and the Japanese scope of learning. This explained why China’s modernization was restricted mainly to ammunition and technological transformation, while Japan’s modernization stretched from political constitution, law and order, to the lifestyles of the Japanese.

This study provided an analysis of the reasons leading to the apparent different endings of the modernizations in China and Japan, despite their similar aim to learn from the Westerners to strengthen themselves. This thesis can be helpful for further and in-depth studies on the modernizations in these two countries in the nineteenth-century.