

Why Did Japan Succeed and China Fail? And Isn't Modernization the Same Thing as Westernization?

By Brian Platt

While walking through the hallways of a high school near the university where I teach, a set of posters hanging outside a classroom caught my attention. The posters had been drawn by students in a tenth-grade world history class. Their assignment, I learned later, was to represent in visual form the differences between the modern historical experiences of Japan and China, particularly in relation to the two countries' responses to Western imperialism in the nineteenth century.¹

The posters provoked in me two different reactions. One was admiration: the projects demonstrated remarkable creativity and insight, and I shuddered to think how my own tenth-grade work would have paled in comparison. I was also pleased to learn that the students were actually studying East Asia in some depth, especially considering the time constraints faced by high school world history teachers.² The students in this class were addressing, in a rather sophisticated manner, some of the same issues that professional historians of modern East Asia spend their time discussing—namely, imperialism, modernization, Westernization, and the differences between the historical trajectories of Japan and China since the nineteenth century.

Yet the projects also reminded me of the rift between popular and academic representations of East Asia. These projects expressed many of the central assumptions about East Asia and modernization that professional historians have spilled much ink over the past few decades trying to problematize. Two assumptions stood out prominently in the students' projects: first, that Japan "succeeded" in modernization and China "failed" because the former embraced the West and China rejected it; second, that modernization and Westernization are synonymous. It was not really a surprise to come across these assumptions, since I see them in my college students all the time. In most cases, students acquire these assumptions not from high school history classes, but from a lifetime of input from popular culture. In the classroom I attempt to confront these assumptions whenever they come up, but I often feel

my efforts are too sporadic to be effective. Precisely because these high school projects illustrate these assumptions so compellingly, I decided to use them in an attempt to address them in a somewhat more systematic fashion.

Mine is by no means an unprecedented endeavor.³ Scholars of Chinese and Japanese history have been problematizing these assumptions since the 1960s. In fact, these assumptions have been so thoroughly critiqued that, at least when speaking or writing to other scholars, it might not seem necessary to argue against them anymore. Yet they persist tenaciously among our students—and, in fact, almost everywhere except within the academy. My goal in this essay is therefore to speak to a somewhat broader audience about why these assumptions are problematic, and about how we might teach the critical moment of East Asian history addressed in these high school projects—Japan's and China's nineteenth-century response to Western imperialism—without falling back upon these assumptions.

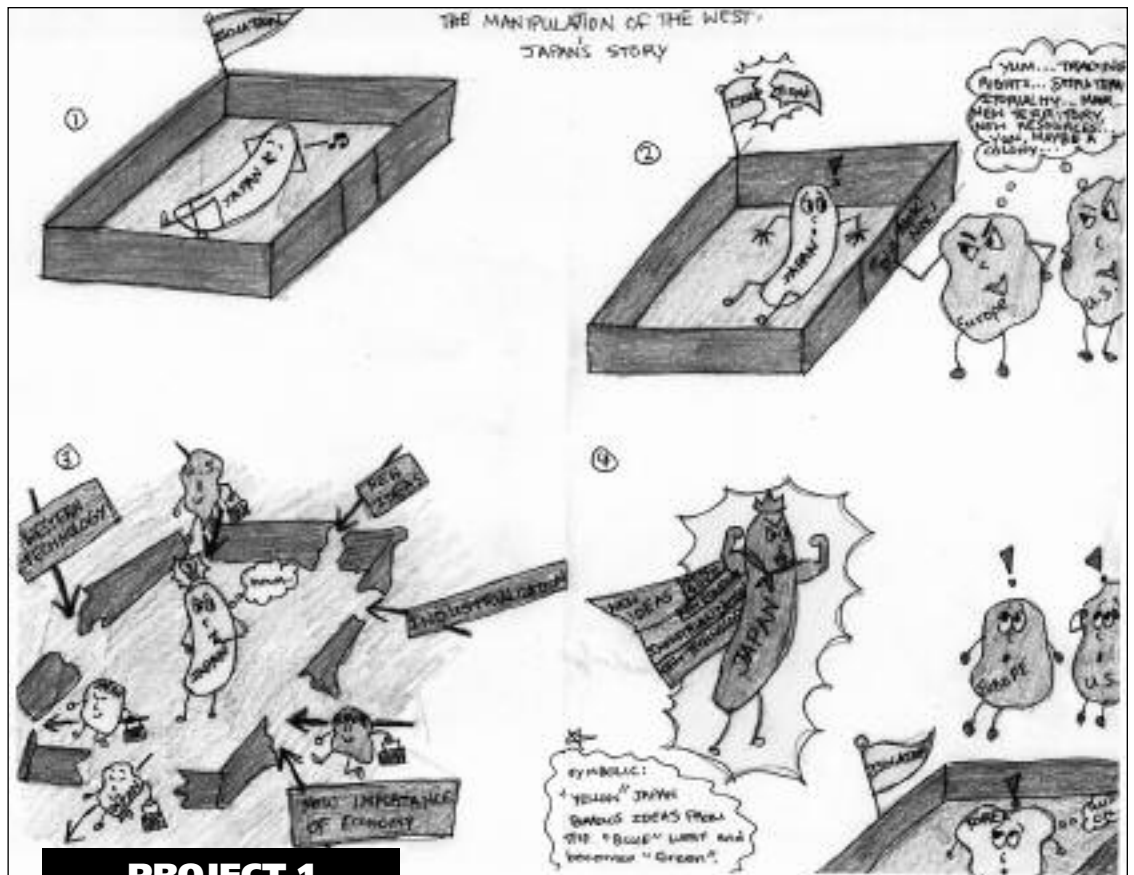
"Success," "Failure," and the Reception of Western Influence

How do students view this topic?

Almost all of the students' projects characterized Japan's nineteenth-century response to Western imperialism in terms of "success," while representing China's response (or lack thereof, as most students saw it) in terms of "failure." Furthermore, the projects explained the respective fates of the two countries as being a direct result of their attitude toward the West: Japan succeeded because it accepted Western influence, and China failed because it did not. In project #1, Japan before Western imperialism (depicted here as a yellow pickle) is shown resting idly but contentedly in isolation. This student's depiction of Japan as surrounded by four walls is, of course, deeply familiar: the image of Tokugawa-era Japan (1600–1868) as a "closed country"

(*sakoku*)—an image that has been demonstrated to be misleading in many respects⁴—has nonetheless figured prominently in popular and scholarly discourse on Japan since the nineteenth century. In frame two of the project, Japan is awakened by a menacing Europe and America (depicted as blue potatoes), knocking on Japan's walls seeking colonial concessions. In frame three, Japan's walls have broken down, allowing "new ideas," "Western technology," and "industrialization" to come in. Due to these Western influences, Japan emerges in frame four as a powerful nation, to the surprise of the West and the alarm of Korea—who is still behind the same walls of isolation that had previously confined Japan. Japan is now represented by the color green, symbolizing its successful merging of Western (blue) influences and Japanese (yellow) essence.⁵

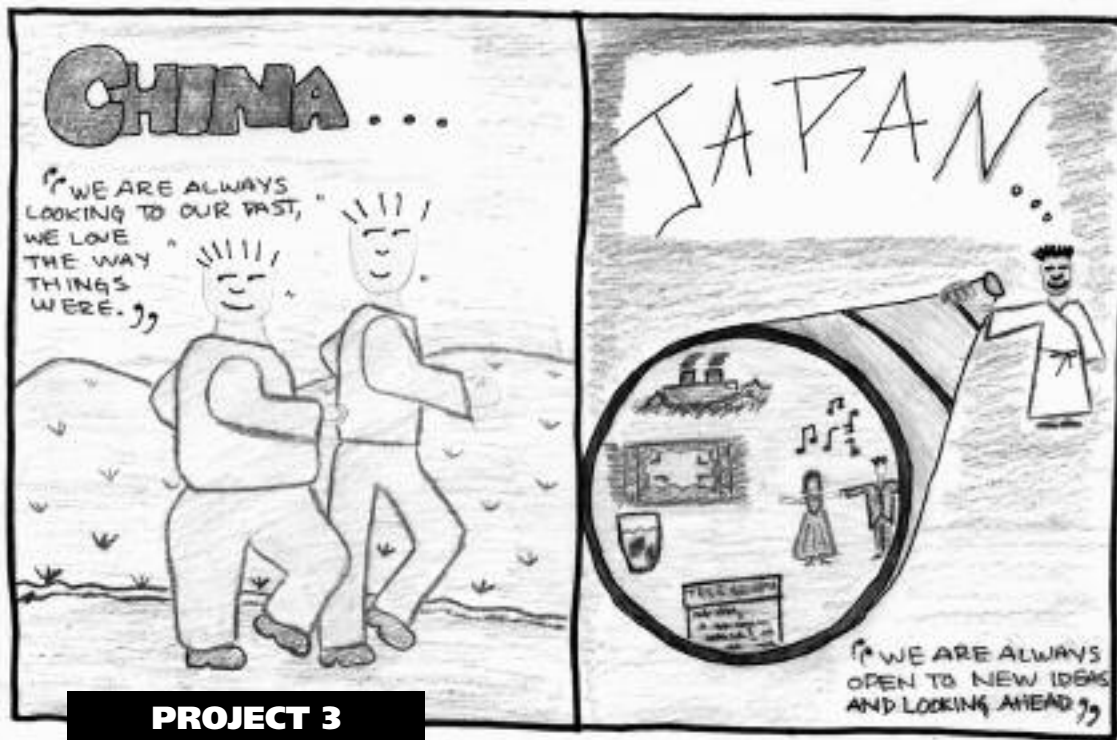
In projects #2 and #3, students echo this characterization of Japan while contrasting it with a China that stubbornly refuses to accept Western influence. Project #2 juxtaposes a China that responds to Western imperialism by hiding under a bed, with a Japan that eagerly and excitedly opens its arms to Western civilization. In project #3, two Chinese men are looking back over their shoulders towards their past, while a Japanese man holding a telescope can see what the modern West has to offer; he is, in this student's words, "always open to new ideas and looking ahead." With his telescope he sees what the Chinese refuse to acknowledge: that Asia is the past, and the West is the future. In the narrative presented by all three projects, Japan accepts Western influence and succeeds, while China rejects it and fails. It is also noteworthy that the students view colonial conquest as a natural result of Japan's successful modernization. In project #1, a triumphant Japan strengthened by its acceptance of Western influence is now able to menace its Asian neighbors. In project #2, a modernized Japan now holds the deed to Korea; colonial conquest is, in other words, one of the spoils of modernization, the reward for Japan's decision to embrace the West. By contrast, China's rejection of the West brings about its own victimization at the hands of modern colonial powers: Britain's victory over China in the Opium Wars (represented by the sling emblazoned with the Union Jack) is China's just punishment for resisting Western influence.⁶



PROJECT 1



PROJECT 2



Even if we avoid the rhetoric associated with this mindset, the narrative of world history presented in both high school and college classes tends to reaffirm the assumptions of that mindset. When students first encounter East Asia in a world history class, they generally study it as one of the major civilizations of the pre-modern world. This “civilizational” approach provides students with a portrait of what East Asia was like before its fateful encounter with modern Western imperialism. To fill out this portrait, many courses focus on a number of recognizable historical figures or institutions or attributes commonly associated with East Asia—

Why is this view problematic?

1 It is inaccurate to say that Japan accepted Western influence and China rejected it. In the two decades or so following the initial confrontations between East Asia and European imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century, one can identify in both China and Japan a broad range of ideas about how to respond to the new threat. Some commentators arrogantly dismissed the threat. Others responded with violent hostility toward the West. Others expressed the need to adopt Western technology while preserving some sort of Asian essence or spirit. Still others wanted to adopt not only technology but also social and political institutions and, to some extent, cultural values. On the whole, the range of attitudes towards the West was remarkably similar in the two countries.

One could argue that the similarity ended after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when Japanese leaders began to build a modern nation-state based largely on Western models. But this effort was neither unanimously supported by the Japanese people nor motivated by an unambivalent embrace of things Western. Furthermore, in China, too, one can identify a number of reform efforts at both the central and provincial levels that were similar in many ways to the Meiji state-building project—except, of course, that Chinese leaders were unable to carry out these reforms effectively on a national scale (a point I’ll return to in a moment).

2 If we view the acceptance or rejection of the West as the key factor behind East Asia’s modern historical path, we reinforce certain stereotypes of a “static” East and a “dynamic” West. These stereotypes were initially generated by a nineteenth-century Orientalist mindset that created an image of Asia to stand in contrast to the West’s own image of itself. While the West’s self-image was characterized by modernity, rationality, and progress, the Orient embodied tradition, mysticism, and resistance to historical change.⁷

Confucianism, samurai, the family system, the imperial institution, Buddhism, the *Tale of Genji*, the examination system, the Great Wall, footbinding, and so on. All of these are indeed important, as they represent some kind of significant development in East Asian history. What is often lost, however, is the fact that these items belong to very different moments in the history of East Asia—moments often separated by hundreds of years of historical change. As a result, what students usually see is a portrait of a timeless, changeless East Asia composed of elements removed from their specific historical contexts. They often come away with a still-life portrait of “East Asian Civilization” that does not correspond to any actual moment in East Asian history.

After studying East Asia and other non-Western civilizations in this way, students in most world history classes then proceed to examine in some detail the “rise of the West,” focusing on the various changes (scientific revolution, industrialization, and so on) by which the West became modern and powerful. What is significant here is that after encountering non-Western civilizations that seem more or less changeless, students then study the West in a period of revolutionary historical change. Put another way, after seeing traditional East Asia as a still-life, they see the West as a moving picture. This tends to confirm students’ preconception that the West is characterized by historical change and the rest of the world by continuity. (Or, if non-Western change is recognized, it is usually portrayed as cyclical rather than forward-moving.) Since students see change as natural to the West and alien to the non-West, they come to the logical conclusion that nineteenth century East Asia could have changed only if it *received* change from the West. Japan’s supposed acceptance of the West and China’s supposed rejection of it thus provides a compelling explanation for what happened to the two countries in the second half of the nineteenth century.

3 The notion of “success” and “failure” that informs this view of East Asian modernization often carries with it moral connotations that must be problematized. Specifically, students too often interpret “success” in modernization as a moral good, and “failure” as a moral evil. We can identify such undertones in project #4, which states explicitly what the other projects imply: that China “lost” and Japan “won.” China’s failure to embrace the West and modernize condemned it to a future of opium addiction and a primitive way of life (symbolized by the ox-drawn carriage), while Japan’s success brought with it technology, which students already tend to see as an inherently good thing. In my own classes I frequently detect a tone of contempt or disgust on the part of students who castigate China for not accepting the inevitability of modernization. We need not avoid all moral judgments when teaching history, but we should challenge students to examine the assumptions on which those judgments are made.

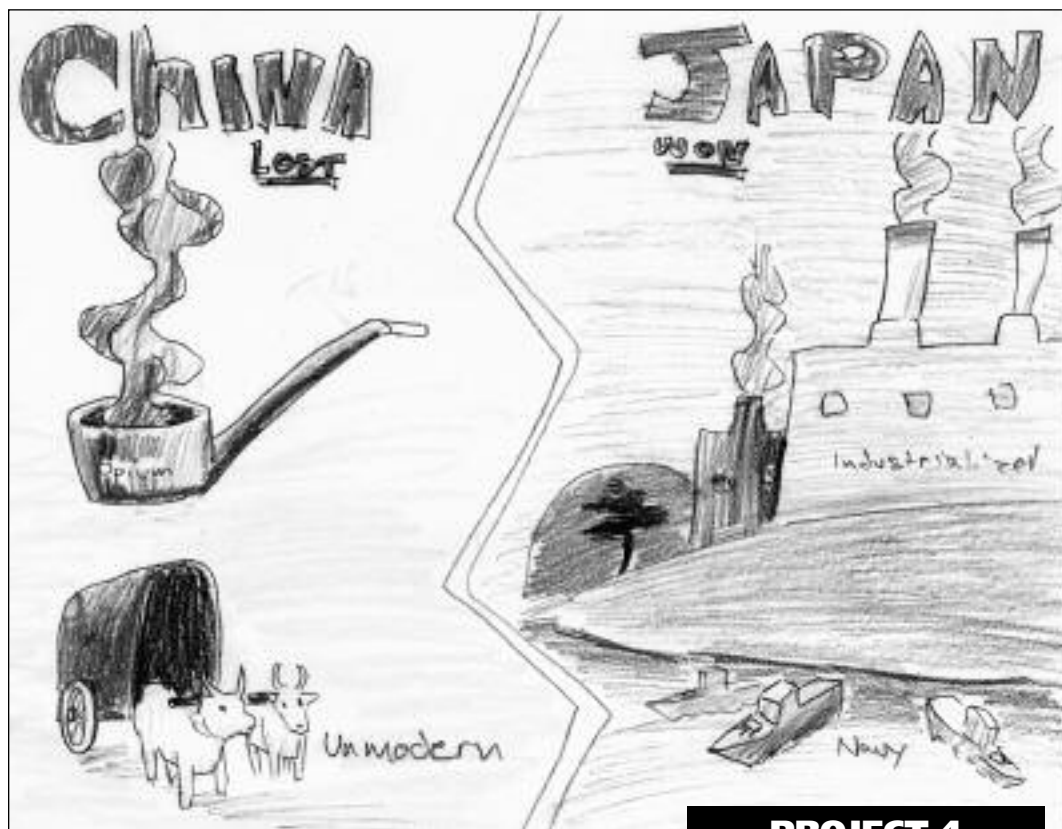
How should we address these problems?

1 The issue of how China and Japan viewed the West is undeniably important, and teachers should explore this with their students. However, as I noted above, Japan and China exhibited a similar range of attitudes towards the West in the aftermath of their initial confrontation with Western imperialism.⁸ There is no clear contrast between the attitudes of China and Japan as a whole (at least in terms of “acceptance” or “rejection”), and no simple correlation between these attitudes and the subsequent fates of the two countries during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Rather, the key issue is that, in the half-century after the initial confrontation with the threat of Western imperialism, Japan was able to build a centralized nation-state. On an administrative level, this involved the abolition of the more than 200 largely autonomous domains into which the country had been divided during the Tokugawa period,⁹ and the subsequent creation of a nationwide administrative structure directly accountable to the new Meiji government.¹⁰ It also involved the successful mobilization of a critical mass of local leaders to serve in this new government and carry out its initiatives at the local level. But in addition, the process of centralization in Japan involved integrating ordinary people into the institutions of the modern state and cultivating among those people a personal identification with the nation. Together, these centralizing efforts made Japan a nation-state, one whose strength

was based upon the collective energies of individuals who believed they had a stake in the country’s future. This far-reaching process of centralization did not occur independent of influences from the West. Many of the institutional reforms carried out by the Meiji government—in schooling, the military, etc.—were indeed based on Western models. But this selective adoption of Western influences was only a part of the bigger and more consequential phenomenon of centralization.

When discussing the history of East Asia during the second half of the nineteenth century, then, the central question is why Japan was able to centralize in this way and why China was not.¹¹ This is a complex issue, and there are many ways to approach it. This makes it a wonderful opportunity for students to engage in historical analysis and debate. What was the determining factor in centralization? Was it geography? (China is big; Japan is smaller, and is an island nation.) Was it the difference between the two countries’ imperial institutions? (In Japan, the emperor was not tied inextricably to the existing political regime, and thus could be used to legitimize political upheaval; in China, the emperor was bound up in the existing regime in a way that precluded such a development.) Was it because of the political structures of the two countries? (One could argue, for example, that the decentralized nature of Japan’s political order at the time of its confrontation with imperialism brought the crisis to a head more quickly and encouraged Japanese leaders to envision a new kind of political order.) Was it the fact that Tokugawa Japan experienced such a remarkable degree of cultural integration that, after the fall of the Tokugawa regime, the impulse of local leadership was to move toward the new center rather than away from it?¹² Or should we look not to



PROJECT 4



PROJECT 5

differences between Japan and China, but to those between the United States and Britain? (Scholars have argued that Britain's interest in the China trade—particularly opium—resulted in more intrusive economic incursions than were exacted upon Japan by the United States.)¹³

These are just a few possible factors students might address when studying nineteenth century East Asia. Some aspects of this discussion require more background knowledge of Japan and China than students in high school or college world history classes are likely to possess. However, students can try to answer the question with whatever knowledge they bring to the table. Even when their hypotheses are wrong, they will nonetheless be engaging in historical analysis using evidence. Furthermore, by organizing the discussion around the question of centralization (rather than that of accepting or rejecting the West), they will be forced to look *within* Japan and China—rather than simply at the West—to explain modern East Asian history.

2 How can we avoid confirming students' assumptions about a passive and static East Asia and a dynamic West? If we retain the basic structure of most world history classes—snapshots of non-Western societies in their "traditional" state, followed by an examination of the internal dynamics of change that produced the rise of the West, followed by a discussion of the "reaction" of non-Western societies to the challenge of Western modernity—we fight an uphill battle. Nonetheless, there are a few simple ways to counter these stereotypes while working with the general structure of existing world history classes.

First, we can explicitly address stereotypes of a changeless Asia and a dynamic West. When we come across them in our students' work—or, better yet, in the textbooks or videos we use in class—we can take a moment to talk about these stereotypes and where they come from.

Second, we can avoid presenting the rise of the West as a historical inevitability, as if Europe's pre-eminence over the past two centuries emerged necessarily and predictably out of its history and culture. Of course, scholars continue to argue about this point. Some stress that Europe did possess a unique set of cultural values that enabled it to make a historic leap towards modernity,¹⁴ while others portray the rise of the West as more accidental—the product of a fortuitous set of circumstances in the world economic system that Europe was ideally positioned to exploit to its advantage.¹⁵ But even those who adopt the former position would agree, I think, that if one could be transported back to the year 1500—or even 1750—it would be startling, even unbelievable, to hear that Europe would by the late nineteenth century achieve worldwide economic and military dominance. In sum, we should portray the rise of the West as a recent, historically-contingent phenomenon, made possible (at least in part) by a specific set of historical circumstances.

Third, we can help undermine the image of a passive and static Asia by taking time to deal with changes in Asia during the period immediately preceding the Western incursions of the mid-nineteenth century. Both Qing China and Tokugawa Japan underwent major transformations in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries: commercial expansion, urbanization, population increase, substantial growth in schooling and literacy, vigorous intellectual debate, and the emergence of new cultural and artistic forms. Emphasizing these changes will help counter stereotypes about an inert and static Asia. Moreover, if we ignore these changes we deprive students of critical information they need to help them analyze what happened to Japan and China during the second half of the nineteenth century.

3 How do we avoid conferring moral significance to the story of Japanese success and Chinese failure? First and foremost, by making sure that we don't use morally-laden rhetoric when we present this topic to students. (In fact, it might be a good idea to steer clear of the terms "success" and "failure" altogether.) First, we should avoid the temptation to describe modern Chinese history

strictly in terms of dysfunction and tragedy, even though the Chinese themselves have often described it in such terms. Conversely, we ought to avoid telling the story of Japan's rise to the status of a modern nation-state in a celebratory tone, making sure to remind students that Japan's "successful" drive to modernization had its own tragic consequences: ultra-nationalism, colonial aggression, militarism, and a catastrophic war. We might also take the opportunity to raise the more general question of whether it is necessarily a good thing to become modern. This issue, of course, requires us to discuss with students what it actually means to become modern—a question to which I now turn.

Modernization and Westernization

How do students view this topic?

Most students tend to view modernization and Westernization as synonymous. They believe that the particular historical experience of the West represents a singular, universal model for becoming modern. To become modern, therefore, is to become Western—which, in the minds of most students, involves a wholesale adoption of Western values and cultural practices.

Students often articulate this idea through the metaphor of clothing. Specifically, the persistence of traditional clothing in China is used as both symbol and evidence of China's failure to modernize, while Japan's successful modernization is expressed as a process of shedding traditional clothes in favor of Western garb. In project #5, for example, a Japanese couple wearing 1920s-style Western clothes—the woman in flapper attire, the man with a business suit and briefcase—are depicted standing on the shoulders of Western political and military leaders against the backdrop of a globe. Japan's emergence as a major world power is thus symbolized, or perhaps even made possible, by the donning of Western clothing and by the larger project of cultural Westernization. Project #6 draws a similar connection between Western clothing and modernization. Japan (represented here in what appears to be the dress of a Chinese scholar-official) is again portrayed as a country behind walls, with an American steamship anchored outside. Japan invites the West inside to master its technology and adopt its political and military systems. As Japan attempts to use its knowledge of the West to transform itself into a modern nation, it gradually abandons its indigenous clothing (robe and sandals) and dons a Western military uniform. Having completed this process, a westernized Japan is now able to "throw [the West] out."

Project #7 states explicitly some of the assumptions behind these visual representations of the relationship between modernization and Westernization. The modern histories of Japan and China are depicted here as a board game in which the ultimate goal is modernization. The two countries begin at the same square, in a condition of static iso-

lation. This condition could not last forever, however, because, in the student's words, "change is inevitable." In the next square, change comes from the outside in the form of Western imperialism; at this point the two countries' paths diverge. Japan "gives in to Westernization," and proceeds immediately to modernity. China, however, does not "give in" to Westernization, and as a result, must proceed down a troublesome historical path. This path includes the Opium wars, the rise of Communism, the loss of Manchuria to Japan, and the destructive reform efforts of the CCP; these are viewed as negative consequences of China's decision to reject the West. China eventually arrives at modernity, but only after it recognizes the need to give in to Westernization. The message is clear: there is a single path to modernity, and it goes through the West.

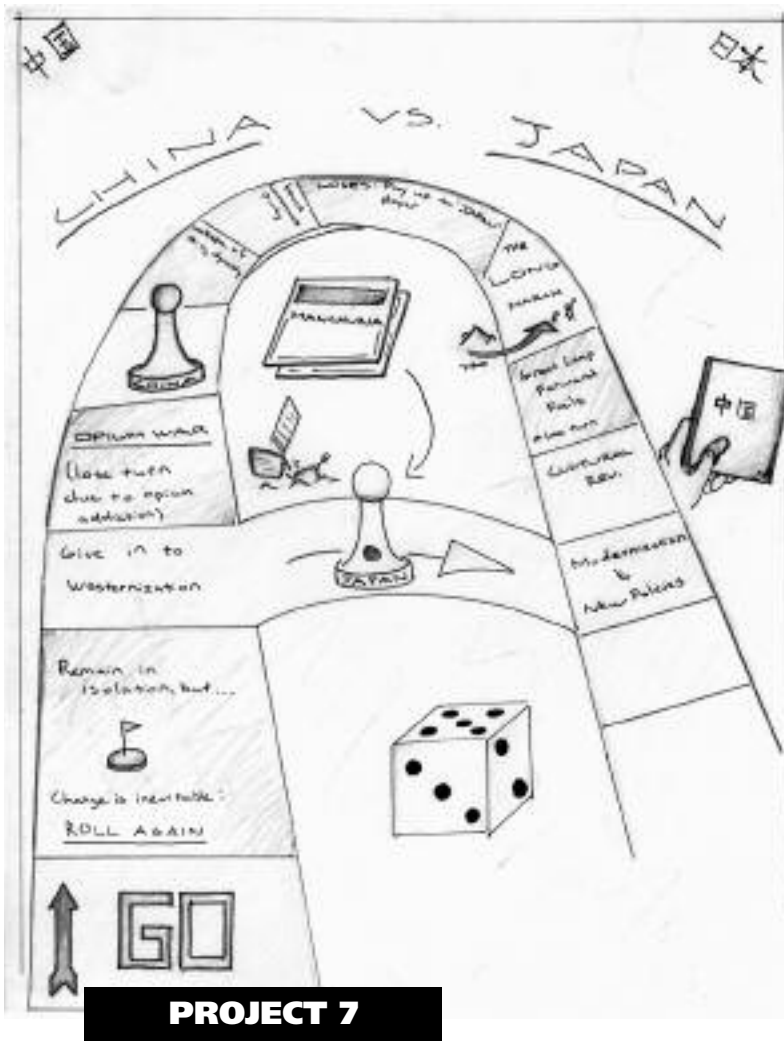
Why is this view problematic?

1 This view, too, reinforces the stereotype of a dynamic West and a static Asia. Why? Because if modernization is the same thing as Westernization, then for the West modernization is a natural process; the West is defined by the inner capacity to become modern. Asia, by contrast, lacks that capacity. To become modern it must become something other than what it is, and always has been. It must abandon its natural, changeless state—usually referred to as "tradition"—and follow the historical trajectory of the West. That's why the image of discarding indigenous clothing and putting on the clothing of the West is so compelling to students.

2 This view also fosters a Eurocentric view of world history, in the sense that the European historical experience becomes the lens through which all other areas of the world are analyzed. If we assume that all countries must inevitably follow the historical path taken by Europe, we will tend to think that what is important about European history should be equally important when examining the history of non-Western societies. For example, if we agree



PROJECT 6



PROJECT 7

How should we address these problems?

1 Engage students in an attempt to make analytical distinctions between modernization and Westernization. Are modernization and Westernization the same thing? If not, how are they different? These foundational questions, in turn, lead to other, more specific questions: Does a society need to be industrialized to be modern? Does it need to be democratic? Secular? Do societies inevitably become more alike as they become modern? Does a modern society need to have a capitalist economic system? Must it have a certain level of literacy? A mass media? Can a predominantly rural society be modern? Can a society with arranged marriages and multigenerational, extended family households be modern? Do the presence of McDonald’s restaurants and video games serve as markers of a modern society? Can you imagine a modern society that looks substantially different from American society? How would it be different? In what ways would it still be modern, despite the differences? While discussing these questions with students, teachers will at every turn run into undefined terms (like “modern” and “Western”) and unexamined assumptions. These moments provide great teaching opportunities, but instructors should not feel as if they have to clear everything up; the purpose, in my view, is simply to help students think critically about the issues at hand.

Instructors should call attention to the fact that China and Japan have struggled with these same kinds of questions. Following the expansion of European and American imperialism into East Asia in the mid-nineteenth century, both countries grew intensely concerned with the question of whether they could become modern without becoming Western. Such a discussion necessarily involved an attempt to distinguish between “modern” and “Western.” Usually, commentators did this by dividing the material realm from the spiritual or cultural realm—for example, by saying that Asia could become materially modern in terms of technology, institutions, and wealth while maintaining a cultural or spiritual uniqueness rooted in tradition. Most students tend to accept this notion at face value, believing that there is some kind of unchanging Asian essence underlying a veneer of modern material life. Instructors should, however, help students recognize some of the problematic assumptions behind such a view.

On the other hand, attempts by European and American scholars to distinguish between modernization and Westernization have been similarly problematic. In the 1950s and 60s, scholars attempted to create a generic definition of modernization, one not based exclusively on the historical experience of Western Europe and America.¹⁷ This effort has since been widely critiqued, however, and many scholars would now argue that the goal of a culturally neutral definition of modernization is inherently suspect.¹⁸ But even with no consensus on a universal definition of modernization, engaging students in an attempt to define it is worthwhile, as it requires them to hold the concept up to critical scrutiny.

2 Indeed, what is crucial is that teachers treat “modernization” and “modernity” as *concepts*—historically-bounded ideas that can be subjected to critical inquiry. In the minds of the nineteenth century actors we’re studying, these were not concepts as such, but self-evident descriptions of reality. For Europeans and Americans,

with Max Weber that the protestant ethic was instrumental in the rise of capitalism in Europe, we should therefore examine non-Western societies to see if an analogous ethic can be located there too.¹⁶ Studying non-Western countries becomes an exercise in plotting their history against a backdrop of the trajectory of the West. This methodology prevents us from seeing the history of other countries on their own terms. Moreover, it tends to idealize and oversimplify European and American history, too, making the experience of “the West” appear much more uniform than it actually has been.

3 This view accepts the universalistic claims of Western modernity as self-evident. The nineteenth century European and American concept of progress claimed a single path to modernity, and that the West stood at its destination. Therefore, everything that supposedly characterized European and American society at that moment—its economic system (capitalism), its values (for example, individualism), its political system (liberal democracy), its ideological underpinnings (a faith in science and reason), and so on—were viewed as being not just better, but universal. That is, people assumed that all societies must, and inevitably will, embrace these things, because they represent the destiny of humankind. Many instructors and students may still agree that those things are, in fact, desirable for everyone, but historical analysis requires us to stand outside of them and view them critically.

“modern” described who they were, the stage in history to which they had evolved. And for the most part, China and Japan internalized this view, even though it placed them “below” the West and generated anxiety and ambivalence about becoming modern. For all parties involved, modernization and Westernization were inseparably linked, even though Japan and China struggled mightily to think about how to achieve the former without the latter. We, too, can try to separate and define them; as I note above, this effort is fraught with problems, but it can be a valuable exercise for students of world history. More importantly, however, we need to help students develop an analytical distance from what nineteenth century historical actors thought about what it means to be (or become) modern. This is not an easy task, particularly since contemporary American culture still views many of these ideas as commonsensical. In the classroom, however, we need to recognize that these ideas about the relationship between modernity and the West emerged at a specific moment in time, in a specific area of the world, and were generated by a specific set of historical conditions. In other words, we need to historicize these ideas, placing them within the context of a specific historical moment and making them the object of historical analysis. ■

NOTES

1. My sincere thanks to these students for agreeing to let me use their posters for this article.
2. These time constraints have always existed, but in Virginia—as in many states—they have become more pressing due to the increasing emphasis on “Standards of Learning” exams as a tool for determining teacher and student success.
3. A great number of articles and books aim to critique the assumptions that undergird both scholarly and popular understandings of East Asia, but one of the most accessible and straightforward is Paul Cohen’s *Discovering History in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
4. See Ron Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1984). Toby’s book reveals that the Tokugawa government actively pursued foreign relations in the seventeenth century in an effort to legitimize its claim to domestic power. Of course, in order for diplomacy to serve this legitimizing function, it had to be conducted on the Tokugawa government’s terms; as a result, the government limited its diplomatic linkages to Korea and the Ryūkyū Kingdom, while maintaining links of trade and information with the Dutch and Chinese.
5. This same color scheme was employed in a Chinese documentary called “River Elegy.” The documentary represented Chinese tradition with the color yellow, manifested concretely in the silt of the Yellow River; the West, by contrast, was represented by the color blue. The documentary ends with an urgent plea for China to merge with the path of modern Western civilization—a plea accompanied visually by an overhead shot of the Yellow River emptying into the blue ocean, producing a new, green, civilization.
6. Robert Eskildsen demonstrates that, from the very inception of the Meiji period, many Japanese embraced this idea that colonial expansion was an integral, natural part of the process of modernization. See Eskildsen, “Of Civilization and Savages: The Mimetic Imperialism of Japan’s 1874 Expedition to Taiwan,” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 388–418.
7. The foundational work on this concept of Orientalism is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
8. Instructors seeking to introduce students to Chinese and Japanese attitudes towards the West can consult Wm. Theodore de Bary, et. al, comp., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), and the corresponding volume for Japan, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 2. Students can, for example, compare the excerpted writings of Japanese commentators Aizawa Seishisai and Hirata Atsutane with those of the Chinese Lin Zexu and Feng Guifen.
9. For a brief, synthetic discussion of the nature of the Tokugawa political order, see Mary Elizabeth Berry, “Public Peace and Private Attachment: The Goals and Conduct of Power in Early Modern Japan,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 237–71; and Ronald Toby, “Rescuing the Nation from History: The State of the State in Early Modern Japan,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 197–237.
10. For a discussion of the project of political centralization during the first decade of the Meiji period, see Michio Umegaki, *After the Restoration* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).
11. Those familiar with Chinese history may find this question surprising, insofar as pre-modern China’s claim to fame has often been its centralized political authority. Some historians even argue that it was precisely China’s comparatively high level of centralization that impeded China from playing a more dominant role in the modern world economy. Conversely, they argue that Europe—which until around 1500 had been comparatively backward relative to China and marginal to the world economy—was able to achieve such economic and political dominance because of its decentralized political order. It’s important to point out that I’m speaking here of a different kind of centralization: not just a centralized political structure, but a centralized nation that identifies itself with such a structure. I should also point out here that, when discussing this issue in the classroom, we should focus on the question of why Japan was able to build a centralized nation-state, rather than on the question of why China did not. To focus unduly on the latter often causes students to see something “wrong” or “dysfunctional” with China, when in fact, China’s fate was much more typical of the experience of non-Western countries that faced the threat of European imperialism in the nineteenth century.
12. See Mary Elizabeth Berry, “Was Early Modern Japan Culturally Integrated?” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 547–81.
13. Frances Moulder, *Japan, China and the Modern World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
14. See, for example, David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Others So Poor* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).
15. See Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). For an excellent summary of this debate, see Gale Stokes, “The Fates of Human Societies: A Review of Recent Macro-histories,” in *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 (April 2001): 508–25.
16. I use this example because a seminal work on Tokugawa religious history attempted to do precisely this. See Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan* (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1957).
17. Since Japan was seen at that time as the only non-Western country to have modernized, it was of great interest to scholars seeking to create a culturally neutral definition of modernization. The definitive statement of the theoretical underpinnings of this scholarship is John Whitney Hall, “Changing Conceptions of the Modernization of Japan,” in Marius Jansen, ed., *Changing Japanese Attitudes Toward Modernization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 7–43.
18. For a description of the political context for this scholarship, see Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and ‘Nation-Building’ in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). For a critique of this scholarship as it relates to the study of Japan, see John Dower’s introduction to his book, *Origins of the Modern Japanese State: Selected Writings of E. H. Norman* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975); and Harry Harootunian, “America’s Japan/Japan’s Japan,” in Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *Japan in the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 198–221.

BRIAN PLATT is Assistant Professor of History at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. His book, *Burning and Building: Schooling and State Formation in Japan, 1750–1890*, is forthcoming from Harvard University Press in Spring 2004. His current research deals with popular historical consciousness and commemorative practices in eighteenth-and nineteenth-century Japan.