

Handout One:
East Asia and the Western Powers in the 19th Century

In the early 19th century, the three major East Asian states – China, Japan, and Korea – seemed to have much in common. They shared a common admiration for Chinese civilization and had governments that placed great value on Confucian teachings. Their societies were quite hierarchical and people had a strong sense of belonging to a particular class (rather than all being equal citizens of one country). And all three kept contact with Western states to a minimum. Europeans had been sailing to East Asia since the 16th century, when it took everything they had just to get so far. At that time they were in no position to make demands on the states of East Asia. By the 19th century, however, things had changed. The industrial revolution, advances in military and ship-building technology, and wealth from their overseas colonies had given the Europeans the power to challenge the governments of China, Japan, and Korea.

The three East Asian states responded quite differently. Chinese officials tried to ignore the European threat. They had major internal problems of their own to deal with, including a series of rebellions and natural disasters that may have claimed as many as 60 million lives. Consequently, when the British defeated the Chinese in the Opium War of 1839-42, forcing the Chinese to open several new ports for trade, the Chinese did not consider it to be the most serious problem they faced. In addition, China was ruled by the Manchus, a non-ethnically Chinese people who were quite nervous about stirring up nationalism for fear that Chinese sentiment could turn against them.

Japan, in contrast, took the threat very seriously. When American ships demanded that the Japanese sign a “friendship treaty” in 1854, Japanese leaders vigorously debated whether they should comply or fight to keep the foreigners out. In the end, a group of samurai who believed that Japan could only maintain its independence by learning from the Westerners in order to grow strong overthrew the old government in 1867. They created a new state centered on the emperor (known as Meiji), welcomed exchange with Western merchants, traveled abroad to learn about the West, and brought Western technology to Japan. They also recognized the importance of developing a citizenry unified and devoted to the state, so they took steps to create loyal citizens.

The Koreans fiercely resisted all efforts to get them to open up to the outside world. When the French and the Americans sent naval expeditions in the 1860s and early 1870s, the Koreans fought them off. It was a Japanese military expedition in 1876 which finally forced the Koreans to sign a treaty and open the country. Although they soon signed treaties with other foreign powers, the Koreans showed little interest in learning about Western technology. And Korea remained a country very divided along class lines. The aristocratic landowning class (the yangban) had a strong sense of elite identity that kept them separate from other Koreans. At the other end of the spectrum, some Koreans were hereditary slaves, also quite distinct from other members of society.

In part due to these very different responses, by the end of the 19th century, the three states of East Asia seemed quite different. Japan defeated China in a war (the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95) largely because the Japanese had mastered Western military techniques and fought as a modern, united state. Chinese forces did not have the same sense of national purpose, and some refused to fight or commit resources to the war. Korea became a battleground as China and Japan fought over which power would have primary influence on the Korean peninsula. Ten years later, Korea would be made into a Japanese protectorate and soon thereafter into a Japanese colony.

In this lesson, we are going to look at some of the ways that the Japanese government helped to create a sense of equal citizenship and common identity among the people who had been divided by class for so long. In particular, we are going to look at Japanese images of the Sino-Japanese War to see how artists tried to instill a sense of pride in ordinary Japanese.