

China's 19th-Century Modernization Efforts: What Issues Could Modernization Resolve?

Developed for NCTA at the Program for Teaching East Asia

Lesson recommended grade level: High School World History

Lesson estimated number of days or class periods: Four 50-minute class periods plus homework

Introduction: This inquiry lesson could be used within a unit on 19th-century imperialism. The focus of the lesson is not on what Western nations imposed on China, but on China's efforts to modernize, partly in response to Western imperialism. As with all countries that modernized in the 19th and early-20th centuries, China had to resolve questions about what should be changed and what should be preserved. The activities in this lesson ask students to examine some of those changes and consider why those changes were necessary but other aspects of China's economy, society, and culture were preserved.

This lesson requires access to the internet for full classroom viewing and for individual and small group student work.

Note that this activity integrates historical inquiry skills with other skill building exercises such as Question Formulation Technique, See-Think-Wonder visual analysis, and Quick Write. This lesson can be shortened by adapting or omitting some of these activities.

To undertake the lessons successfully, students require background knowledge on:

- Ø "Modernization" in the context of the late-19th century; and
- Ø Historical events in China from the mid-19th century forward.

Prior to the lesson, teachers should read the **Teacher Background Note**, which outlines an important reading on the modernization process, viewed through the discipline of sociology, and offers a reference regarding internal challenges faced by the Qing dynasty in the mid-19th century.

“In the 1860s, [Qing] reformers launched what became known as the ‘self-strengthening movement.’ They imported western technology, setting up factories to make modern weapons. They developed shipyards, railroads, mining, and light industry. The Chinese translated western works on science, government, and the economy. However, the movement made limited progress because the government did not rally behind it.” From *World History: Connections to Today* by Elisabeth Gaynor Ellis and Anthony Esler (Upper Saddle River, NJ)

students identify any new questions they have now. If questions could not be answered, have students identify what information they would need to answer those questions.

5. Exit ticket—Have students write a headline for the story about what China’s modernization looked like.

Day 3: Supporting Question #2: What challenges did modernization pose for China?

1. (Optional) Start class with a two-minute [Quick Write](#). Have students write how they would feel about a proposed change to school policy like the introduction of school uniforms, the cancellation of all school dances including prom, or an effort to increase student academic focus by ending all extra-curricular activities. Select the scenario that is likely to get the strongest student response. At the end of 2 minutes, have students circle/highlight the emotions they included in their responses and then record the class’s list. Tell students that the documents they will be reading today are by people who were experiencing great changes in their lives and their country. Students should note if they see any of the same emotions that were circled in their Quick-Writes.
2. For Supporting Question #2, students will read excerpts from the writings of two Chinese scholars who were debating the best method for China’s self-strengthening efforts in the late-19th century. Half of the students will read [Document 19: “Wo-jen’s Objection to Western Learning.”](#) and the other half will read [Document 20: “The Tsungli Yamen’s Rebuttal.”](#) All students will answer the same set of questions on **Handout 2a or 2b**. Students should read their assigned document and answer the questions on the handout. Then they

This question draws upon material in the MIT Visualizing Cultures project at <https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/>. For this question, students will be examining images published in the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* (1884-1898), a periodical published in Shanghai.

1. Read Peter Perdue's [introduction](#) to the newspaper collection. Students could read as homework. In small groups or as a whole class, have students discuss the following questions:

Was the Dianshizhai Huabao an example of modernization? If so, in what ways? If not, why not? (Affirmative answers should likely address the printing technology that made these kinds of papers possible as well as how the Dianshizhai Huabao was patterned after Western newspapers. Negative answers might mention the long history of printing in China or the long tradition of mixing text and images in China.)

Whose perspectives are represented by the Dianshizhai Huabao? (Answers should note that while the paper was printed by an Englishman, the reporters and artists were Chinese. Perdue mentions the varied nature of the stories included in these issues, ranging from information on battles and new Western technology to stories highlighting filial piety or telling tales of ghosts. Students should consider how the need to sell papers may have influenced what stories were included.)

Who would have been the typical audience for the Dianshizhai Huabao? (Perdue indicates that the paper would have been too expensive for the working class, but the

accepting of the final statements, this answer might be slightly better due to closer observations of the types of industries shown in the images but it is still only adequate.

The best answers will include how the quote does describe the types of industries the Chinese worked to develop but also takes notes of the tensions created by those modernization efforts which the quote does not address. Those tensions were most visible in the text documents and in the newspaper images. Depending on how much background knowledge students get about China in the 19th century, the best answers will also challenge the usual story that attributes China's failure to modernize to an inherent flaw in the Chinese, which is what the quote is referencing in its final statements.

References

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Teacher Background Note

To be able to engage with the lesson material, students will need an understanding of what modernization was, as well as what happened in China from the mid-19th century forward.

Modernization

[“Modernization”](#) by Krishan Kumar at Britannica.com provides an explanation of modernization through a sociological lens. Excerpts of this article could be used to provide students with background information about modernization. Kumar emphasizes the centrality of industrialization to the development of modernization, which is supported by the usual periodization of world history with both the Industrial Revolution and the Modern Period starting with 1750. To emphasize the importance of industrialization, Kumar contrasts modern life with agrarian (pre-industrial) life in terms of production and family structures. In conjunction with industrialization, Kumar describes the ways in which urbanization resulted from industrialization and contributed to new ways of living associated with modernization. In addition to industrialization, Kumar also identifies the political revolutions of the late 18th and early 19th centuries and the subsequent political systems as a significant aspect of what characterized modernization. The combination of anonymity of urban life and the political emphasis on rights created a culture that emphasized the increasing importance of the individual. Note that for historians, modernization also usually includes the development of the nation-state and creation of a national identity (eg. national anthem, flag, language, education). While the creation of a nation-state and a national identity was not part of China’s modernization efforts in the 19th century, these elements were parts of modernization efforts in Europe and Japan.

Mid-19th Century China

Most textbooks provide some background on China in the 19th century, but the focus tends to be on the role of imperialism and the actions of nations like Britain and France. In *Ways of the World*, Robert Strayer explains both the external pressures due to Western imperialism and the internal challenges faced by the Qing dynasty in the mid-19th century. The map of the [“Collapse of the Chinese Empire”](#) visually shows some of those challenges. Aside from multiple rebellions and foreign aggression, the Qing political system had not kept pace with the rapid population growth. Strayer highlights the fact that while China’s population had grown from 100 million in 1685 to 430 million by 1853, the number of county officials had not increased. So while the increased population was putting greater strain on agricultural land and the food supply, the Qing bureaucratic system was less and less able to effectively perform basic functions like “tax collection, flood control, social welfare, and public security.” (p. 565)

Instruction

A Frayer Model could be used to help students make sense of modernization. One description and sample of a Frayer model is here:

<https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/ela/bank/6->

Handout 1: What did China's modernization look like?

Handout 2a: What challenges did modernization pose for China?

Handout 3: How did the Chinese make sense of modernization? - *Dianshizhai Huabao* First Year Issues

As a group, peruse the entire edition of the *Dianshizhai Huabao* you have been assigned and then select 4 images from the edition that capture the “typical” story for the paper. In the table below, provide the image title, a brief description of the image, and a summary of the image’s caption.

Image Title	Image Description	Caption Summary
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

Handout 4: How did the Chinese make sense of modernization? - *Dianshizhai Huabao* Later Editions T-chart

As you examine these three images, note the similarities and differences between TJETQq0.0000091.

Handout 5: Review

Handout 6: Summative Assessment: What issues could modernization resolve?

Follow the directions below and answer the accompanying questions.

After having examined aspects of China's efforts to modernize, review this quote from the beginning of the inquiry:

"In the 1860s, reformers launched what became known as the "self-strengthening movement." They imported western technology, setting up factories to make modern weapons. They developed shipyards, railroads, mining, and light industry. The Chinese translated western works on science, government, and the economy. However, the movement made limited progress because the government did not rally behind it."

From *World History: Connections to Today* by Elisabeth Gaynor Ellis and Anthony Esler (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001) p. 638

Based on what you know and the sources you've examined, how would you rate this description of China's modernization efforts on a scale of 1-4? (1=mostly inaccurate, 4=completely accurate) Be sure to explain the reason for your rating and provide sufficient evidence from the sources in this inquiry to support your rating.