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The Industrial Revolution in Europe and Japan

by [Rit Nosotro](#)

Comparative Essay

Compare the process the of industrialization in Europe and Asia with a focus on England and Japan.

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All revolutions burst forth when a new idea or invention rips open the sack of tradition and flows out into the open world washing over all obstacles in its way. This happened to all known radical changes; be it the French, Russian, Chinese, or Industrial Revolution. The later acted just as any other; swallowing up the old world and turning all

eyes towards the future. Its first to experience this flood was Europe where it found England would go with the flow. Other Europeans struggled to understand and use this new environment of rapid radical change and like small children dog paddling into a current, they eventually learned from their mistakes and gained profincy through great cost.

International trade carried these waves of new ideas to the Orient where barriers were thrown up against the approaching tsunami. China learned nothing could stop the tide when the Opium Wars brought her to humiliating defeat. Japan initially barricaded herself away from these changes until Mathew Perry rode the industrial wave to her shores demanding entrance. With some trepidation, Japan used the combined forces of military pride and Shintoism to throw her unified population into the onslaught of the Industrial Revolution.

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The causes and progression of the Industrial Revolution in Europe and Asia contrasted in striking ways. Whereas the Europeans developed the technologies over the course of nearly two centuries, the Asians skimmed off the cream that had been churned by others. Through reverse engineering Asia leapt into the 20th century with military prowess that surprised European powers. This was first evident in Japan's victory over Russia in 1905.

The Industrial Revolution had first revealed itself in the busy city streets of Great Britain around the year 1760. Quite a number of reasons lie in the foundation of this phenomenon. The first and most evident characteristic which still distinguishes England is its geographical position (1). Located on an island not far away from the European mainland, it was considered a part of that continent but still remained somewhat isolated from their wars (2). Therefore, England was the only country that had come out of the destructive Napoleonic Wars “not ravaged by financial plunder and economic collapse”.(3) England was an ideal country to advance in building a future instead of patching its old holes of the past. In addition, England was overflowing with natural resources like “coal, iron, lead, copper, tin, limestone, and water power” (4) from both its own lands as well as its many colonies. The Agricultural Revolution had simplified everything from improvements in plowing, planting, and harvesting to the inventions of weaving and spinning machines. This revolution released workers from the labor intensive farm work and food supplies brought on increased population. Where ever the technological revolution advanced, so did the population migrate to the cities seeking employment. Accordingly, with the population rising, and the increasing demand for more clothing and similar light goods, the rural areas started building the first factories (5). While these technological advances allowed the Industrial Revolution to rage through Europe, Asia had lay still as a tiger, confident in her strength to spring at any prey. When the tiger was aroused, the unprepared weakness was made evident.

In the dusk of the XIX century, Japan awoke to a world where dragons and Samurai were not as powerful as they had once been. Japan's emperor, Meiji, understood how far his island was behind Europe. He therefore put all his power to gain “recognition of [Japan's] considerable achievement [and strove] for equality with Western nations” (6). Of course this served as the main cause for the Industrial Revolution to sew its seeds among their rice, but one other circumstance collapsed all walls of doubt and acted as the final impetus for the start of this Revolution in Japan. As this island moved into modernity, it imported manufactured goods from both Europe and the United States which resulted in the small Japanese producers becoming undersold at the market and many even proclaiming bankruptcy (7). This fact led to even more aggression from the side of the Japanese emperor who therefore refused to buy any foreign goods; he resolved to grow Japan into an invincible nation which did not require anybody's help. Even though Japan's modernization began a century later, in less than 30 years it had completed what had taken Europe three centuries, as it "built on the work of another".(8) This immense speed was due to the Japanese seeking “to establish an advanced industrial society without adopting any of the ‘negative western traits’ ” (9).

The Industrial Revolution was a time during which both Europe and Japan tried to claim the title of leading state. After having closely studied Europe, the Pacific island chose which methods to adopt: German's “style

military and political institutions,” US’ education, France’ banking program, and England’s “naval expertise and railway systems” (10). As Japan grasped the object of this international game, it soon turned into “an industrially optimized society” whose mass production became the “focus of its culture” (11) following the slogan – “fukoku kyohei”, or “Enrich the country and strengthen the military” (12). To their delight, the Japanese soon “discovered that they already grew and could manufacture a variety of goods that people overseas wanted, from tea and raw silk to gold leaf and buttons and cotton textiles” (13). Japan watched Europe closely to borrow the best technology available and at the same time avoiding their mistakes (14), Europe continued to submerged itself in new inventions like the steam locomotive designed by George Stephenson and the steam-powered ship by Robert Fulton (15). According to Taichi Sakaiya, the “innovation of the steam engine is uniquely characterized as a revolution transformation of not only industry but economy and society as well” (16).

The development of technology and transportation also helped spread the Christian gospel. With steamships and railways being built through out the world, it became easier for missionaries to travel to the most distant corners of the earth. In addition, a large number of newspapers and books started to be reproduced. This served as a great circumstance for Bibles to be translated into many languages, then printed and sent all around the globe. Moreover, before Japan had opened the gates to the world in the late XIX century, it had not known anything other than itself. Although Jesuit missionaries had introduced a form of Christianity to Japan centuries before the Industrial Revolution came ashore, Japan had banned Christianity and remained ignorant of other religions except for Shintoism and Buddhism. As Japan stepped into the Industrial Revolution she was introduced to Christianity (17) where nature was only revered as it was created by a Creator who deserved all worship.

In both Japan and Europe there was a tremendous difference between the rich bourgeoisie who owned the means of production and factory and mine workers who labored for them. According to observations voiced by [Karl Marx](#), while the bourgeoisie enjoyed the comfort and warmth of rich homes with the soothing jingling of money in their pockets, the poor (proletariat) struggled under terrible living conditions without a single penny. Moreover, because of such poverty, families sent their children to work in factories. Therefore, children age five and older worked for 16-19 hours everyday without even the least hint of becoming anything more than a beggar running down streets and praying for money. Fortunately, labor unions and Christian organizations such as the Salvation Army lobbied to restrict the hiring of both women and children, and the situation became a little better in Europe (18).

The revolution changed the world forever. As the inevitable wave continues to spread into nations around the world, the benefits of the industrial revolution continue to improve the lives of millions. The rate of change is sometimes painful as the old cultures adjust to modernization. From out of the rice fields, Japan rapidly rose to become the chief producer of top-technology robotics, automobiles, and consumer electronics, while Great Britain, the instigator of the Industrial Revolution, voluntarily moved to the background as she granted independence to her colonies. Even England’s black history of the Opium Wars resulted to the ultimate benefit of Hong Kong and now the increasing capitalism of China.

Quick Quiz:

1. What war did not cause damage to Great Britain in the XIX century?
 - a. World War II
 - b. World War I
 - c. Napoleonic Wars
 - d. Crimean War

2. What served as the final impetus for Japan's Industrial Revolution?
 - a. the imported European and American goods left Japan's own producers undersold and bankrupt
 - b. the Japanese government wanted to increase level of heavy industry
 - c. the victory in Russo-Japanese war
 - d. the traditions of the Samurai culture

3. What system did Japan adopt from France?
 - a. the art of wine making
 - b. the principals of democracy
 - c. the educational system
 - d. the banking program

4. Who was the steam locomotive designed by?
 - a. Haruchito Takeda
 - b. George Stephenson
 - c. Robert Fulton
 - d. Sherlock Holmes

Endnotes:

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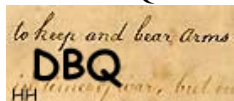
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