Asian Responses to Imperialism: Crash Course World History #213

Crash Course: World History
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?John: Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're going to return to our old friend, the rise of the west.

John from the past: Ugh, Mr Green, we know. The west rose, we've talked about this a million times.

John: Yeah, me from the past, I'm sympathetic to your position, but the thing is, this is a big deal in world history circles and today, we are going to talk about the rise of the west from the perspective of people who don't live there.

(Intro Reel)

So today, we're going to look at how some people who experienced the rise of the West firsthand responded to it. We're going to focus on East Asia and also the Middle East, which is also Asia. Anyway, both of these communities dealt with European imperialism in the 19th and early 20th centuries. So, just a quick note here, European imperialism affected millions of people, including agricultural and industrial workers, very few of whom left records of their experience. So we end up relying on the words of people who wrote things down, intellectuals. Now, many of those people were European, but in this case, most of what we'll be examining today is covered by a fascinating book by Pankaj Mishra, called *The Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia.* Mishra's book draws heavily from the perspectives of three Asian thinkers, and I will remind you, mispronouncing things is my thing. He looks at Middle Easterner Sayyid Jamal Ad-Din Al-Afghani, Liang Qichao from China, and Rabindranath Tagore from India. Through their eyes we can see that Asians did recognize the coming dominance of Europe, but they also developed ideas about imperialism that provided a counterweight to Western dominance and gave them a way of imagining their role in this new world.

Alright, let's go straight to the Thought Bubble. Although we tend to equate European imperialism with the late 19th century, especially the carving up of Africa after the Berlin Conference of 1884, for many Asians, the disaster began earlier. In China, the Opium Wars began a train of humiliations, most memorable of which occurred with the destructed of the Summer Palace in 1860. And imperialism wasn't great for the Muslim world either. By 1896, Al-Afghani described Muslims under European imperialism this way: "The foreigners chain up Muslims, put around their necks a yoke of servitude, debase them, humiliate their lineage, and they do not mention their name but with insult. Sometimes, they call them savages and sometimes regard them as hard-hearted and cruel and finally consider them insane animals. What a disaster!"

Just like today's historians, Asian intellectuals were quick to recognize that the reason Europeans were able to dominate and humiliate them was Europe's superior industrial technology and organization, one early response was to say, well, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, or at least, try to follow their models of military organization and education. We see this in attempts at reform, like the Tanzimat in the Ottoman Empire, Al-Afghani initially echoed these calls to study more science and philosophy, but his comparison of philosophers with prophets was too radical for the Ottomans and he ended up being expelled from Istanbul.

Chinese intellectuals responded similarly to the humiliation of the Opium Wars, with calls for self-strengthening, a phrase coined by its biggest supporter, Feng Guifen. Given China's almost 2,000 year history of an education system based on Confucian values and classical texts, which, to be fair, had worked pretty well for them for most of that time, adopting Western models of education and organization was gonna be a tough sell, as Yan Fu, a Chinese writer and translator put it, "China governs the realm through filial piety, while Westerners govern the realm with impartiality. China values the sovereign, while Westerners esteem the people. China prizes the one way, while Westerners prefer diversity. In learning, Chinese praise breadth of wisdom, while Westerners rely on human strength."

One Chinese reformer, Kang Youwei, took up the challenge of blending Western and Chinese ideas of governance by attempting to update Confucianism for the modern world and arguing that political reform and mass mobilization were central concerns for Confucius himself. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So all of that gets to a big question, imperialism was a disaster for a lot of people, but there were things about what the West was doing to control much of the world that were obviously working. So the question for people outside the West became: What, if anything, do we take from this and try to borrow and integrate into our own communities? Well, in addition to education and military reforms, many Asian intellectuals felt that Europe's strength was rooted in its political organization, into nation-states. That sounds a lot like today's historians and also economists. Everyone's crazy about nation-states. Except the Mongols. (Mongol montage!)

Then, you know what, I stand with the Mongols on that, I think empire is underrated, I would make an excellent emperor, for instance. You know what they'd call me, Stan? Genghis John. Anybody? Yeah? I hate myself. But anyway, so these intellectuals became proponents of nationalism, like, by 1879, Al-Afghani was advocating that Muslims begin to think of themselves as a nation, in the sense of a culturally unified people. Here he is in words that recall the German nationalists of the time: "There is no happiness except through nationality and no nationality except through language...a people without unity and a people without literature are a people without language. A people without history are a people without glory, and a people will lack history if authorities do not rise among them to protect and revivify the memory of their historical heroes so that they may follow and emulate...all this depends on a national education, which begins with the fatherland, the environment of which is the fatherland, and the end of which is the fatherland." Are you sure that wasn't a German nationalist, Stan, because that was a lot of fatherlands? Maybe it was translated by a German.

And then there's India. As the most thoroughly colonized Asian territory, India's feelings about nationalism were very complicated. Some Indians wanted to create a European style state organized around Hinduism, but of course, India had a large Muslim minority and also, Hinduism, with its caste divisions, wasn't great for creating political unity. Others, like Aurobindo Ghose were critical of adopting too many European ideas, worrying that India, quote, "was in danger of losing its soul by an insensate surrender to the aberrations of European materialism." Aberrations of European materialism? I don't know what you're talking about. Oh, that is delicious, hold on, I gotta play Floppy Bird for a second.

But many Asians considering adopting European models of nationalism look to one of its biggest success stories: Japan. For Europeans, Japan became kind of a confirmation of a modernization program, industrialization, centralization, and to a lesser degree, liberal constitutionalism, could work. And this was also true to some extent for Asian intellectuals, including Liang Qichao and Rabindranath Tagore, both of whom visited Japan. But ultimately, Japan didn't provide a great model for other Asians attempting to reform their own states, especially because Japan embarked on its own imperial expansion. It's almost as if, in addition to industrialization and centralization and et cetera, imperialism was just part of building a strong nation-state.

So by the early 20th century, many Asian intellectuals were looking beyond Western models. Some, like Liang Qichao and Al-Afghani, considered supranational movements, like pan-Asianism and pan-

Arabism. They envisioned these huge political conglomerates that could transcend Europe's dominance, but eventually, both they and Tagore turned to their own traditions as a source of strength. And what they all had in common was a loss of faith in liberal democracy as a source of strength, especially after the Versailles Treaty in 1919. Like after flirting with Pan-Arabism and being expelled from a different Ottoman city, this time Cairo, Al-Afghani became convinced that, quote, "Modernization hadn't secured the Ottomans against infidels. On the contrary, it had made them more dependent." He embraced the idea that the best defense against the West was Islam. Mishra says of this, "As he saw it, attacking religion risked undermining the moral basis of society altogether and weakened the bonds that held communities together, precisely the weakening that had plunged Muslims everywhere into crisis." Now, this doesn't mean that he became what we today think of as an 'Islamist radical' or an 'Anti-Modernist'. Instead, he believed that the Qur'an contained its own calls for reform, and that Islam could be a catalyst for change, ultimately, Al-Afghani believed that the transformation of Islamic society had to come from within. Like his favorite Qur'anic injunction was: "God does not change the condition of a people until they change their own condition."

In China, Liang Qichao came up with a different source of reform, the strong state. After the failure of the Boxer Rebellion in 1901, he wrote his awesomely titled, "On The New Rules For Destroying Countries." This was a critique of European imperialism, but it was also a call for a strong, somewhat authoritarian state that could stand up to the West. Nah, China would never do that. Oh, wait. Wait a second. They did! Eventually he came to the conclusion that the Chinese people must now accept authoritarian rule. They cannot enjoy freedom. Well, that's pretty extreme.

Ohhh, it's time for the Open Letter. But first, let's see what's in the globe today. Oh, look, it's some underappreciated authoritarian rulers. An Open Letter to Authoritarianism:

Dear Authoritarianism:
Listen, I am all for democracy, but the tyranny of the majority is no joke. And there have been many times when democratically elected governments were less pluralistic than authoritarian ones. Not only that, if you can keep corruption out of it, there is an astonishing efficiency to doing it your way. Like, who's gonna make this decision. Oh, I know, the Queen! It's always the Queen, no need for exploratory committees or different houses of Congress, the Queen can do it! Maybe I'm just a little frustrated with Congressional gridlock, authoritarianism, but I kind of think you're underrated.
Best wishes,
John Green
p.s. Just wanna confirm that I am not advocating for authoritarian rule in the United States.

So Liang also visited the United States, which made him more convinced that liberal democracies did not provide an answer, especially because they discriminated so much against Asians. And then, World War I and the insane map-drawing spree of the Treaty of Versailles just further confirmed all of it. I mean, despite the lofty rhetoric of Woodrow Wilson's 14 points and the League of Nations and everything, the result of the war looked suspiciously like the pre-war imperialism that many Asians believed was a cause of the war in the first place.

But perhaps no one was more skeptical of the 'if you can't fight 'em, emulate 'em' strategy of dealing with imperialism than Indians. Gandhi, for instance, went very far in his critique of the West's modernism, saying that it lacked spiritual freedom and social harmony, even rejecting many aspects of the industrial revolution itself. I mean, this was a person who sewed his own clothes. And interestingly, one of the most vocal Indian critics of the West was the one who was perhaps most positively received there. Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for a body of work that essentially said 'you guys are terrible at everything'. To quote Mishra, "Tagore's message to the West was that their modern civilization built upon the cult of money and power was inherently destructive and needed to be tempered by the spiritual wisdom of the East." Now, he didn't reject industrialization completely, and he acknowledged that, quote, "the age belongs to the West and humanity must be grateful to you for your science", but cautioned an audience in New York that, quote, "you have exploited those who are helpless and humiliated those who are unfortunate."

So, as we've talked about before, our perspective on events really colors our version of the truth. Living as we do, in an age dominated by more or less liberal nation-states with varying degrees of market freedom, it can be tempting to consider their development as both inevitable and good. And I'm certainly not going to throw rocks at both a political system and a nation-state that allows and enables me to put up videos like this and provides a space for millions of you to agree and disagree. But when we look at responses to imperialism, I mean, after we get beyond the obvious criticism that imperialism generally is bad, we start to focus on the responses to it that confirm this deep down feeling we have. You know, that it was bad to extract all of those resources, but ultimately, we spread tolerance and pluralism and the nation-state and those all worked out. So I worry that we look at self-strengthening in China or the Ottoman reforms as examples of where Asians were on the right track, and then we see the failure of those reforms as confirmation that Asians were somehow just unready or unfit for the benefits that the West had so generously offered. But if you look at the actual words and actions of Asians who experienced imperialism first-hand, you get a very different picture. Asians thinkers were critical of the West from the very earliest stages of new imperialism. Looking back at the evolution of the intellectuals we've talked about today reminds us that Asians were not simply victims of imperialism's ideology. In fact, they've continued to influence ideas about the West today, and not only outside the West. When we in the West lament our insensate surrender to the aberrations of European materialism, we should recognize that that criticism didn't necessarily originate from within.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week. CrashCourse is made with the help of all of these nice people here in the Chad & Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, and exists because of your support on Subbable.com. Subbable's a voluntary subscription service that allows you to support CrashCourse directly so we can keep it free for everyone forever, so thank you to all of our Subbable subscribers, and thanks to you for watching. As we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.?

(CrashCourse endscreen plays)