

The Champion of English Section
Senior Division

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Name of School : St. Paul's College
Book Title : From the Ruins of Empire
Author : Pankaj Mishra
Publisher : Penguin

Synopsis

By re-telling the history of the past two centuries, from the Industrial Revolution and the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the Paris Peace Conference and the May Fourth Movement, Pankaj Mishra takes a look at how centuries of Asian pride and heritage could be tarnished overnight by gunboats and cannons from the West, but then be salvaged by revolutionaries, like Sun Yat-sen, from the ruins of an once-great empire and transformed into the world as we know it today.

Analysis

“Those who adapt to change survive, and those who do not, perish”, Darwin’s laws of natural selection never fails to apply to the history of mankind. For centuries,

China had been the inchoation of human civilization, from the invention of printing technology and gunpowder to Confucius, who shaped the morals of the Chinese society. The same applied to the Indians and Arabs, who produced many of the world's greatest languages, religions, and ideologies during a time when Europe was no more than a barren continent full of barbarians. Yet, why do we, living in the centre of Asian civilization, eat, work and play like a Westerner? Needless to mention the elephant in the room, why is this book report written in a language developed by a bunch of Anglo-Saxon peasants who once led a culturally impoverished life on an island thousands of miles away?

Answering this question to a full extent may produce a book thicker than the Holy Bible, but starting off with *From the Ruins of Empire* should be a good enough attempt to understand what made Western civilization dominate over the world for the past century. In this “provocative, shaming and convincing” book, as the Times would call it, Mishra displays a deep understanding and conducts a comprehensive analysis of the differences between Asian and Western cultures, and the factors that constituted the success of Japan in being the first developed nation in Asia and the failure of China in succumbing to foreign invasion.

Viewed in the West as a period of triumph, hence the name “the Empire on which the Sun Never Sets”, the Victorian era was experienced by Asians as a time of catastrophe and atrocities. Mishra contends that it was the reluctance of centuries-old empires to reform and acknowledge the technological advancements of the so-

called “red hair bastards”, which led to their becoming of the “sick man of Asia”. The Qing Dynasty was so indulged in its moral and intellectual superiority that it remained oblivious to the economic success of European colonial empires until canons from British gunboats were fired upon the shores of Canton.

On the other hand, the overwhelmingly materialistic ambiance in the West turned it blind to its spiritual and moral obligations. The same technology that made the West a prosperous utopia also churned out imperialists who exploited, enslaved, tortured, raped and murdered their way through Asia in order to gain power, land, markets and resources.

In the midst of all this, Asia’s intelligentsia was greatly divided on the touchy issue of modernization. Radicals insisted on a full imitation of the West, leaving no room for Confucius or Buddha to have a say in structuring their society, whilst scholars who noticed the fallacies in the moral systems of the West (most notably Liang Qichao and Ramanath Tagore) warned of the great perils that may lay ahead when one becomes unrestrained by moral principles and desires only material satisfaction. Adopting the former’s mindset, Japan’s prosperity soon rose to a level equivalent to that of the West. However, it would also find itself amongst a league of expansionists, imperialists and colonialists, who sought territory and resources through perpetuating violence and bloodshed.

Mishra also illustrates the arduous efforts of patriots and nationalists to help save their countries. Filled with hopefulness and ecstasy by Japan's victory over a European superpower – Russia, revolutionaries, activists and thinkers across Asia flocked overseas to garner ideas of creating a strong and modern Asia. Introduced to ideals such as the freedom of speech, separation of powers and universal suffrage through various channels, the idea of ending autocratic rule and establishing a democratic republic seemed very appealing. Yet, their efforts were made futile by power-hungry dictators, like Yuan Shikai and Chiang Kaishek, who were more concerned about strengthening their own authority than strengthening the country.

In retrospect, decades of invasion and turmoil were the result of two omnipresent human flaws, ignorance and greed. The history told by Mishra serves as an ever-important warning of the potential calamities caused by such fallacies in our moral systems.

The imperative now is, have we learnt our lessons from history? From Singapore in the south to Seoul in the north, Asia has taken a massive leap into the 21st century. Those who established constitutions and democratic systems to guarantee the rights of their people have transformed themselves into modern first world states. Replicating the success of the Meiji Restoration, these nations gradually established institutions in the whole spectrum of society, from education to legislation. No longer being bound by traditional paradigms, Asians have become more receptive to foreign technologies and cultures.

They have now taken the lead in the spheres of technological and cultural development. Most notably, South Korea has taken not only the whole of Asia, but also the West, by storm with its K-Pop culture and Samsung smart phones.

In a broader view, with the success of the United Nations functioning as an international peacekeeping body, the world no longer suffers from the carnage brought by colonial empires desiring to expand their territories. Discrimination based on gender, race and sexual orientation has been outlawed in most countries in the developed world and the advocacy of equal rights has become the primary goal of many governments.

These advancements all owe their thanks to the many scholars, thinkers, reformists and activists who emerged from the ruins of colonial empires to create an unstoppable Asian renaissance, as depicted in the book. Without them, the world would still have been stuck in an age of autocracy and xenophobia. These people laid the foundations for a bridge between the East and West, one that would remain intact even after years of bombardment by bullets and cannons.

But before getting carried away by such optimism and painting an overly blissful picture of the world, one must be reminded that tyrannical dictatorial regimes, violent oppression against civilians and extremists committing all sorts of atrocities in the name of religion are still a common sight in many areas around the world. Anti-Western

sentiments, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia run high amongst communities appalled by the phenomenon of globalization.

As a proud citizen of “Asia’s World City”, it is probably time to ponder about what our rich Asian cultural heritage and our century-long exposure and in-depth knowledge about the West could contribute to a world where cultures are being brought together every day. The West has given us science and democracy, as the gateway to the East, what can we bring to the table in return?

An apt example can be the following. Once utterly rejected by students of the May fourth Movement, Confucian ideals of “*ren, yi, li, zhi, xin*” or roughly translated as “benevolence, righteousness, proper rite, knowledge and integrity” are in fact not that irrelevant to modern society. Though achieving spiritual fulfillment may seem rather preposterous in a world of unlimited material wants, bearing in mind these values can bring us closer to a world of peace and harmony—one where corporations take up social responsibilities, instead of exploiting the underprivileged to maximize their profit; where politicians are aspiring to the greater good of the people, instead of embezzling public funds; and where nations set aside their cynicism and work towards mutual understanding.

In conclusion, history is a mirror for us to reflect upon our merits and flaws. This book tells us of a history of merging and colliding cultures that shaped our present, and would continue to shape our future. Without a doubt,

globalization remains one of the world's greatest challenges till this day. The gaps between cultures of different regions and generations are vast; bridging them may take up to several decades or even centuries. Still, a quick comparison of the world in 2015 and the world depicted in the book shows us the immense progress we have made. Who knows where tomorrow will lead us to?