

Chinese Cultural Studies:

Paul Kennedy:

The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers:

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The story of the "rise and fall of the Great Powers" ... maybe summarized here. The first chapter sets the scene for all that follows by examining the world powers around 1500 and analyzing the strengths and weakness of each of the "power centers" of that time--Ming China; the Ottoman Empire and its Muslim offshoots in India, the Mogul Empire; Muscovy; Tokugawa Japan; and the cluster of states in west-central Europe. At the beginning of the sixteenth century it was by no means apparent that the last-named region was destined to rise above all the rest. But however imposing and organized some of those oriental empires appeared by comparison with Europe, they all suffered from the consequences of having a centralized authority which insisted upon a uniformity of belief and practice, not only in official state religion but also in such areas as commercial activities and weapons development. The lack of any such supreme authority in Europe and the warlike rivalries among its various kingdoms and city-states stimulated a constant search for military improvements, which interacted fruitfully with the newer technological and commercial advances that were also being thrown up in this competitive, entrepreneurial environments. Possessing fewer obstacles to change, European societies entered into a constant upward spiral of economic growth and enhanced military effectiveness which over time, was to carry the ahead of all other regions of the globe.

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....Indeed, placed alongside these other great centers of cultural and economic activity, Europe's relative weaknesses were more apparent than its strengths. It was, for a start, neither the most fertile nor the most popular area of the world; India and China took pride of place in each respect.

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Nor could it be said that Europe had pronounced advantages in the other realms of culture, mathematics, engineering, or navigational and other technologies when compared with the great civilizations of Asia. A considerable part of the European cultural and scientific heritage was, in any case, "borrowed" from Islam, just as Muslim societies had borrowed for centuries from China through the media of mutual trade, conquest, and settlement. In retrospect, one can see that Europe was accelerating both commercially and technologically by the fifteenth century; but perhaps the fairest general comment would be that each of the centers of world civilization about that time was at a roughly similar stage of development, some more advanced in one area but less so in others. Technologically, and therefore, militarily, the Ottoman Empire, China under the Ming Dynasty, a little later northern India under the Moguls, and the European states system with its Muscovite offshoot were all far superior to the scattered societies of Africa, America and Oceania...

Of all the civilizations of premodern times, none appeared more advanced, none felt more superior, than that of China. Its considerable population, 100-130 million compared with Europe's 50-55 million in the fifteenth century; its remarkable culture; its exceedingly fertile and irrigated plains, linked by a splendid canal system since the eleventh century; its unified, hierarchical administration run by a well-educated Confucian bureaucracy had given a coherence and sophistication to Chinese society which was the envy of foreign visitors...

To readers brought up to respect "western science", the most striking feature of Chinese civilization must be its technological precocity. Huge libraries existed from early on. Printing by movable type had already appeared in eleventh century China, and soon large numbers of books were in existence. Trade and industry, stimulated by the canal building and population pressures, were equally sophisticated. Chinese cities were much larger..and Chinese trade routes as extensive. Paper money had earlier expedited the flow of commerce and growth of markets. By the later decades of eleventh century there existed an enormous iron industry in northern China, producing around 125,000 tons per annum, chiefly for military and government use--the army of over a million men, was for example, an enormous market for iron goods. It is worth remarking that this production figure was far larger than the British iron output in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, seven centuries later ! The Chinese were probably the first to invent true gunpowder; and cannons were used by the Ming to overthrow the Mongol rulers in the late fourteenth century....the magnetic compass was also another Chinese invention..In 1420, the Ming navy was recorded as possessing 1,350 combat vessels, including 400 large floating fortresses and 250 ships designed for long- range cruising..

The most famous of the official overseas expeditions were the seven long-distance cruises undertaken... between 1405 and 1433. Consisting on occasions of hundreds of ships and ten thousand men, these fleets visited ports from Malacca and Ceylon to the Red Sea entrances and Zanzibar....

Despite the opportunities that beckoned overseas, China had decided to turn its back on the world...

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But the greatest Muslim challenge to early modern Europe lay, of course, with the Ottoman Turks, or rather, with their formidable army and the finest siege train of the age... Almost as alarming, in many ways, was the expansion of Ottoman naval power....

The Ottoman Empire was, of course, much more than a military machine. A conquering elite (like the Manchus in China), the Ottomans had established a unity of official faith, culture, and language over an area greater than the Roman Empire, and over vast numbers of subject peoples. For centuries before 1500 the world of Islam had been culturally and technologically ahead of Europe. Its cities were large, well-lit, and drained, and some of them possessed universities and libraries and stunningly beautiful mosques. In mathematics, cartography, medicine, and many other aspects of science and industry--in mills, guncasting, lighthouses, horsebreeding--the Muslims had enjoyed a lead. The Ottoman system of recruiting future Janissaries from Christian youths in the Balkans had produced a dedicated, uniform corps of troops. Tolerance of other races had brought many a talented Greek, Jew and Gentile into the sultan's service--a Hungarian was Mehmet's chief gun caster in the Siege of Constantinople. Under a successful leader like Suleiman I, a strong bureaucracy supervised fourteen million subjects--this at a time when Spain had five million and England a mere two and a half million inhabitants. Constantinople in its heyday was bigger than any European city, possessing over 500,000 inhabitants in 1600.

Yet the Ottoman Turks, too, were to falter, to turn inward, and to lose the chance of world domination, although this became clear only a century after the strikingly similar Ming decline. To a certain extent it could be argued that this process was the natural consequence of earlier Turkish successes; the Ottoman army, however well administered, might be able to maintain the lengthy frontiers but could hardly expand without enormous cost in men and money; and Ottoman imperialism, unlike that of the Spanish, Dutch and English later, did not bring much in the way of economic benefit. By the second half of the sixteenth century the empire was showing signs of strategical overextension, with a large army stationed in Europe, an expensive navy

operating in the Mediterranean, troops engaged in North Africa, the Aegean, Cyprus, and the Red Sea, and reinforcements needed to hold the Crimea against a rising Russian power. Even in the Near East there was no quiet flank, thanks to disastrous religious split in the Muslim world which occurred when the Shi'ite branch, based in Iraq and then in Persia, challenged the prevailing Sunni practices and teachings. At times, the situation was not unlike that of the contemporary religious struggles in Germany, and the sultan could maintain his dominance only by crushing the Shi'ite dissidents with force.

However, across the border the Shi'ite kingdom of Persia under Abbas the Great was quite prepared to ally with European states against the Ottomans, just as France had worked with the "infidel" Turk against the Holy Roman Empire. With this array of adversaries, the Ottoman Empire would have needed remarkable leadership to have maintained its growth; but after 1566 there reigned thirteen incompetent sultans in succession.

External enemies and personal failings do not, however, provide the full explanation. The system as a whole, like that of Ming China, increasingly suffered from some of the defects of being centralized, despotic, and severely orthodox in its attitude toward initiative, dissent and commerce...Without clear directives from above, the arteries of the bureaucracy hardened, preferring conservatism to change, and stifling innovation. The lack of territorial expansion and accompanying booty after 1550, together with a vast rise in prices, caused discontented Janissaries to turn to internal plunder....[more stuff on internal problems]

To a distinct degree, the fierce response to the Shi'ite religious challenge reflected and anticipated a hardening of official attitudes toward all forms of free thought....

[similar comments of Moguls..]

[more comments of Japan and Muscovy.]

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Why was it among the scattered and relatively unsophisticated peoples inhabiting the western parts of the Eurasian landmass that there occurred an unstoppable process of economic development and technological innovation which would steadily make it the commercial and military leader in the world affairs ? This is a question which has exercised scholars and other observers for centuries, and all that the following paragraphs can do is to present a synthesis of the existing knowledge. Yet however crude such a summary must be, it possesses the incidental advantage of exposing the main strands of the argument which permeate this work: namely that there was a dynamic involved, driven chiefly by economic and technological advances,

although always interacting with other variables such as social structure, geography, and the occasional accident; that to understand the course of world politics, it is necessary to focus attention upon the material and long-term elements rather than the vagaries of personality or the week-by-week shifts of diplomacy and politics; and that power is a relative thing, which can only be described and measured by frequent comparisons between various states and societies...

[At one time race theories were popular, then religious ones..]

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For this political diversity Europe had largely to thank its geography. There were no enormous plains over which an empire of horsemen could impose its swift dominion; nor were there any broad and fertile river zones like those around the Ganges, Nile, Tigris and Euphrates, Yellow, and Yangtze, providing food for masses of toiling and easily conquerable peasants. Europe's landscape was much more fractured, with mountain ranges and large forest separating the scattered population centers in the valleys; and its climate altered considerably from north to south and west to east. This had a number of important consequences. For a start, it both made difficult the establishment of unified control, even by a powerful and determined warlord, and minimized the possibility that the continent could be overrun by an external force like the Mongol hordes.

Conversely, this variegated landscape encouraged the growth, and the continued existence, of decentralized power, with local kingdoms and marcher lordships and highland clans and lowland town confederations making a political map of Europe drawn at any time after the fall of Rome look like a patchwork quilt. The patterns on that quilt might vary from century to century, but no single color could ever be used to denote a unified empire.

Europe's differentiated climate led to differentiated products, suitable for exchange; and in time, as market relations developed, they were transported along the rivers or the pathways which cut through the forests between one area of settlement and the next. Probably the most important characteristic of this commerce was that it consisted primarily of bulk products timber, grain, wine, wool, herrings, and so on catering to the rising population of the fifteenth century Europe, rather than the luxuries carried on the oriental caravans. Here again geography played a crucial role, for water transport of these goods was so much more economical and Europe possessed many navigable rivers. Being surrounded by seas was a further incentive to the vital ship building industry, and the later Middle Ages a flourishing maritime commerce was being carried out between the Baltic, the North Sea, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. This trade... in general continued to expand, increasing Europe's prosperity and enriching its diet, and leading to the

creation of new centers of wealth like the Hanse towns or the Italian cities. Regular long distance exchanges of wares in turn encouraged the growth of bills of exchange, a credit system, and banking on an international scale. The very existence of mercantile credit, and then bills of insurance, pointed to the basic predictability of economic conditions which private traders had hitherto rarely, if ever, enjoyed anywhere in the world. (rather slow and inelegant) vessels capable of carrying large loads and finding their motive power in the winds alone. Although over time they developed more sail and masts, and stern rudders, and therefore became more maneuverable. North Sea "cogs" and their successors may not have appeared as impressive as the lighter craft which plied the shores of the eastern Mediterranean and the Indian ocean; but as we shall see below, they were going to possess distinct advantages in the long run.

The political and social consequences of this decentralized, largely unsupervised growth of commerce and merchants and ports and markets were of the greatest of significance. In the first place there was no way in which such economic developments could be fully suppressed. This is not to say that the rise of market forces did not disturb many in authority. Feudal lords, suspicious of towns as centers of dissidence and sanctuaries of heresies, often tried to curtail their privileges. As elsewhere, merchants were frequently preyed upon, their goods stolen, their property seized. Papal pronouncements upon usury echo in many ways the Confucian dislike of profit making middle men and money lenders. But the basic fact was that there existed no uniform authority in Europe which could effectively halt this or that commercial development; no central government whose change in priorities could cause the rise and fall of a particular industry; no systematic and universal plundering of businessmen and entrepreneurs by tax gatherers, which so retarded the economy of Mogul India..

The fact was that in Europe there were always some princes and local lords willing to tolerate merchants and their ways even when others plundered and expelled them; and as the record shows, oppressed Jewish traders, ruined Flemish textile workers, persecuted Huguenots, moved on and took their expertise with them. A Rhineland baron who overtaxed commercial travelers would find that the trade routes had gone elsewhere, and with it his revenues. A monarch who repudiated his debts would have immense difficulty raising a loan when the next war threatened and funds were quickly needed to equip his armies and fleets. Bankers and arms dealers were essential, not peripheral members of society. Gradually, unevenly, most of the regimes of Europe entered into a symbiotic relationship with the market economy, providing for it domestic order and a non arbitrary legal system (even for foreigners), and receiving in taxes a share of the growing profits in trade...

Probably the only factor which might have led to a centralization of authority would have been such a breakthrough in firearms technology by one state

that all opponents were crushed or overawed. In the quickening pace of economic and technological development which occurred in fifteenth century

Europe as the "gunpowder empires" were established elsewhere. Muscovy, Tokugawa Japan, and Mogul India provide excellent examples of how great states could be fashioned by leaders who secured the firearms and the cannons with which to compel all rivals to obedience.

Since furthermore, it was in late medieval and early modern Europe that new techniques of warfare occurred more frequently than elsewhere, it was not implausible that one such breakthrough could enable a certain nation to dominate its rivals. Already the signs pointed to an increasing concentration of military power. In Italy the use of companies of crossbowmen, protected when necessary by soldiers using pikes, had brought to a close the age of the knight on horseback and his accompanying ill trained feudal levy; but it was also clear that only the wealthier states like Venice and Milan could pay for the new armies officered by the famous condottieri. By around 1500, moreover, the kings of France and England had gained an artillery monopoly at home and were thus able, if the need arose, to crush an over mighty subject even if the latter sheltered behind castle walls. But would not this tendency finally lead to a larger and transnational monopoly, stretching across Europe? This must have been a question many asked around 1550, as they observed the vast concentration of lands and armies under Emperor Charles V.

..Once again, the existence of a variety of economic and military centers of power was fundamental. No one Italian city state could strive to enhance itself without the others intervening to preserve the equilibrium; no "new monarchy" could increase its dominions without stirring its rivals to seek compensation....religious antagonisms were added to the traditional balance of power rivalries, thus making the prospects of political centralization even more remote. Yet the real explanation lies a little deeper; after all, the simple existence of competitors, and of bitter feelings between warring groups, was evident in Japan, India and elsewhere, but that in itself had not prevented unification. Europe was different in that each of the rival forces was able to gain access to the new military techniques, so that no single power ever possessed the decisive edge. The services of the Swiss and other mercenaries, for example, were on offer to anyone who was able to pay for them. There was not a single center for the production of crossbows, nor for that of cannon whether of earlier bronze guns or the later, cheaper cast iron artillery; instead such armaments were being made close to the ore deposits on the Weald, in central Europe, in Malaga, in Milan, in Liege, and later in Sweden. Similarly, the proliferation of ship building skills in various ports ranging from the Baltic to the Black Sea made it extremely difficult for any one country to monopolize maritime power, which in turn helped prevent the conquest and elimination of rival centers of armaments production lying across the sea.

..

he forces possessed by the new monarchies in 1500 have seemed puny if they had been deployed against the enormous armies of the sultan and the massed troops of the Ming Empire... For the explanation of this shift one must again point to the decentralization of power in Europe. What it did, above all else, was to engender a primitive forms of arms race among the city states and then the larger kingdoms...

...

But because the Ming government had a monopoly of cannon, and the thrusting leaders of Russia, Japan, and Mogul India soon acquired a monopoly, there was much less incentive to improve such weapons once their authority had been established... Clinging to the untraditional methods of fighting, the Janissaries of Islam scorned taking interest in artillery until it was too late to catch up to Europe's lead. Facing less advanced peoples, Russian and Mogul army commanders had no compelling need for improved weaponry, since what they possessed overawed their opponents. Just as in the general economic field, so also in this specific area of military technology, Europe, fueled by a flourishing arms trade, took a decisive lead over the other civilizations and power centers.

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[more on colonial rivalry among European powers.]

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The fairer aspects of this increasing commercial and colonial rivalry was the parallel upward spiral in knowledge in science and technology. No doubt many of the advances of this time were spin offs from the arms race and the scramble for overseas trade; but the eventual benefits transcended their inglorious origins. Improved cartography, navigational tables, new instruments....The cumulative effect of this explosion of knowledge was to buttress Europe's technological and therefore military superiority even further. Even the powerful Ottomans, or at least their frontier line soldiers and sailors, were feeling some of the consequences of this by the time of the sixteenth century. Another, less active societies, the effects were to be far more serious....

In most cases, what was involved was not so much positive elements, but rather the reduction in the number of hindrances which checked economic

growth and political diversity. Europe's greatest advantage was that it had fewer disadvantages than other civilizations...

..It was a combination of economic laissez faire, political and military pluralism, and intellectual liberty however rudimentary each factor was compared with later ages which had been since the miracle was historically unique, it seems plausible to assume that only a replication of all its component parts could have produced a similar result elsewhere. Because that mix of critical ingredients did not exist in Ming China, or in the Muslim Empires of the Middle East and Asia, or in any other of the societies examined above, they appeared to stand still while Europe advanced to the center of the world stage.