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Opening Extract from...

Civilization

The West and the Rest

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I
Competition

China seems to have been long stationary, and had probably long ago acquired that full complement of riches which is consistent with the nature of its laws and institutions. But this complement may be much inferior to what, with other laws and institutions, the nature of its soil, climate, and situation might admit of. A country which neglects or despises foreign commerce, and which admits the vessels of foreign nations into one or two of its ports only, cannot transact the same quantity of business which it might do with different laws and institutions . . . A more extensive foreign trade . . . could scarce fail to increase very much the manufactures of China, and to improve very much the productive powers of its manufacturing industry. By a more extensive navigation, the Chinese would naturally learn the art of using and constructing themselves all the different machines made use of in other countries, as well as the other improvements of art and industry which are practised in all the different parts of the world.

Adam Smith

Why are they small and yet strong? Why are we large and yet weak? . . . What we have to learn from the barbarians is only . . . solid ships and effective guns.

Feng Guifen

TWO RIVERS

The Forbidden City (Gugong) was built in the heart of Beijing by more than a million workers, using materials from all over the Chinese Empire. With nearly a thousand buildings arranged, constructed and decorated to symbolize the might of the Ming dynasty, the Forbidden City is not only a relic of what was once the greatest civilization in the world; it is also a reminder that no civilization lasts for ever. As late as 1776 Adam Smith could still refer to China as 'one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in the world . . . a much richer country than any part of Europe'. Yet Smith also identified China as 'long stationary' or 'standing still'.[1] In this he was surely right. Within less than a century of the Forbidden City's construction between 1406 and 1420, the relative decline of the East may be said to have begun. The impoverished, strife-torn petty states of Western Europe embarked on half a millennium of almost unstoppable expansion. The great empires of the Orient meanwhile stagnated and latterly succumbed to Western dominance.

Why did China founder while Europe forged ahead? Smith's main answer was that the Chinese had failed to 'encourage foreign commerce', and had therefore missed out on the benefits of comparative advantage and the international division of labour. But other explanations were possible. Writing in the 1740s, Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, blamed the 'settled plan of tyranny', which he traced back to China's exceptionally large population, which in turn was due to the East Asian weather:

> I reason thus: Asia has properly no temperate zone, as the places situated in a very cold climate immediately touch upon those which are exceedingly hot, that is, Turkey, Persia, India, China, Korea, and Japan. In Europe, on the contrary, the temperate zone is very extensive . . . it thence follows that each [country] resembles the country joining it; that there is no very extraordinary difference between them . . . Hence it comes that in Asia, the strong nations are opposed to the weak; the warlike, brave, and active people touch immediately upon those who are indolent, effeminate, and timorous; the one must, therefore, conquer,

> and the other be conquered. In Europe, on the contrary, strong nations are opposed to the strong; and those who join each other have nearly the same courage. This is the grand reason of the weakness of Asia, and of the strength of Europe; of the liberty of Europe, and of the slavery of Asia: a cause that I do not recollect ever to have seen remarked.[2]

Later European writers believed that it was Western technology that trumped the East – in particular, the technology that went on to produce the Industrial Revolution. That was certainly how it appeared to the Earl Macartney after his distinctly disappointing mission to the Chinese imperial court in 1793 (see below). Another argument, popular in the twentieth century, was that Confucian philosophy inhibited innovation. Yet these contemporary explanations for Oriental underachievement were mistaken. The first of the six distinct killer applications that the West had but the East lacked was not commercial, nor climatic, nor technological, nor philosophical. It was, as Smith discerned, above all institutional.

If, in the year 1420, you had taken two trips along two rivers – the Thames and the Yangzi – you would have been struck by the contrast.

The Yangzi was part of a vast waterway complex that linked Nanjing to Beijing, more than 500 miles to the north, and Hangzhou to the south. At the core of this system was the Grand Canal, which at its maximum extent stretched for more than a thousand miles. Dating back as far as the seventh century BC, with pound locks introduced as early as the tenth century AD and exquisite bridges like the multi-arched Precious Belt, the Canal was substantially restored and improved in the reign of the Ming Emperor Yongle (1402–24). By the time his chief engineer Bai Ying had finished damming and diverting the flow of the Yellow River, it was possible for nearly 12,000 grain barges to sail up and down the Canal every year.[3] Nearly 50,000 men were employed in maintaining it. In the West, of course, the grandest of grand canals will always be Venice's. But when the intrepid Venetian traveller Marco Polo had visited China in the 1270s, even he had been impressed by the volume of traffic on the Yangzi:

> The multitude of vessels that invest this great river is so great that no one who should read or hear would believe it. The quantity of merchandise

> carried up and down is past all belief. In fact it is so big, that it seems to be a sea rather than a river.

China's Grand Canal not only served as the principal artery of internal trade. It also enabled the imperial government to smooth the price of grain through the five state granaries, which bought when grain was cheap and sold when it was dear.[4]

Nanjing was probably the largest city in the world in 1420, with a population of between half a million and a million. For centuries it had been a thriving centre of the silk and cotton industries. Under the Yongle Emperor it also became a centre of learning. The name Yongle means 'perpetual happiness'; perpetual motion would perhaps have been a better description. The greatest of the Ming emperors did nothing by halves. The compendium of Chinese learning he commissioned took the labour of more than 2,000 scholars to complete and filled more than 11,000 volumes. It was surpassed as the world's largest encyclopaedia only in 2007, after a reign of almost exactly 600 years, by Wikipedia.

But Yongle was not content with Nanjing. Shortly after his accession, he had resolved to build a new and more spectacular capital to the north: Beijing. By 1420, when the Forbidden City was completed, Ming China had an incontrovertible claim to be the most advanced civilization in the world.

By comparison with the Yangzi, the Thames in the early fifteenth century was a veritable backwater. True, London was a busy port, the main hub for England's trade with the continent. The city's most famous Lord Mayor, Richard Whittington, was a leading cloth merchant who had made his fortune from England's growing exports of wool. And the English capital's shipbuilding industry was boosted by the need to transport men and supplies for England's recurrent campaigns against the French. In Shadwell and Ratcliffe, the ships could be hauled up on to mud berths to be refitted. And there was, of course, the Tower of London, more forbidding than forbidden.

But a visitor from China would scarcely have been impressed by all this. The Tower itself was a crude construction compared with the multiple halls of the Forbidden City. London Bridge was an ungainly

bazaar on stilts compared with the Precious Belt Bridge. And primitive navigation techniques confined English sailors to narrow stretches of water – the Thames and the Channel – where they could remain within sight of familiar banks and coastlines. Nothing could have been more unimaginable, to Englishmen and Chinese alike, than the idea of ships from London sailing up the Yangzi.

By comparison with Nanjing, the London to which Henry V returned in 1421 after his triumphs over the French – the most famous of them at Agincourt – was barely a town. Its old, patched-up city walls extended about 3 miles – again, a fraction the size of Nanjing's. It had taken the founder of the Ming dynasty more than twenty years to build the wall around his capital and it extended for as many miles, with gates so large that a single one could house 3,000 soldiers. And it was built to last. Much of it still stands today, whereas scarcely anything remains of London's medieval wall.

By fifteenth-century standards, Ming China was a relatively pleasant place to live. The rigidly feudal order established at the start of the Ming era was being loosened by burgeoning internal trade.[5] The visitor to Suzhou today can still see the architectural fruits of that prosperity in the shady canals and elegant walkways of the old town centre. Urban life in England was very different. The Black Death – the bubonic plague caused by the flea-borne bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which reached England in 1349 – had reduced London's population to around 40,000, less than a tenth the size of Nanjing's. Besides the plague, typhus, dysentery and smallpox were also rife. And, even in the absence of epidemics, poor sanitation made London a death-trap. Without any kind of sewage system, the streets stank to high heaven, whereas human excrement was systematically collected in Chinese cities and used as fertilizer in outlying paddy fields. In the days when Dick Whittington was lord mayor – four times between 1397 and his death in 1423 – the streets of London were paved with something altogether less appealing than gold.

Schoolchildren used to be brought up to think of Henry V as one of the heroic figures of English history, the antithesis of his predecessor but one, the effete Richard II. Sad to relate, their kingdom was very far from the 'sceptr'd isle' of Shakespeare's *Richard II* – more of a septic isle. The playwright fondly called it 'this other Eden,

demi-paradise, / This fortress built by Nature for herself / Against infection . . .' But English life expectancy at birth was on average a miserable thirty-seven years between 1540 and 1800; the figure for London was in the twenties. Roughly one in five English children died in the first year of life; in London the figure was nearly one in three. Henry V himself became king at the age of twenty-six and was dead from dysentery at the age of thirty-five – a reminder that most history until relatively recently was made by quite young, short-lived people.

Violence was endemic. War with France was almost a permanent condition. When not fighting the French, the English fought the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish. When not fighting the Celts, they fought one another in a succession of wars for control of the crown. Henry V's father had come to the throne by violence; his son Henry VI lost it by similar means with the outbreak of the Wars of the Roses, which saw four kings lose their thrones and forty adult peers die in battle or on the scaffold. Between 1330 and 1479 a quarter of deaths in the English aristocracy were violent. And ordinary homicide was commonplace. Data from the fourteenth century suggest an annual homicide rate in Oxford of above a hundred per 100,000 inhabitants. London was somewhat safer with a rate of around fifty per 100,000. The worst murder rates in the world today are in South Africa (sixty-nine per 100,000), Colombia (fifty-three) and Jamaica (thirty-four). Even Detroit at its worst in the 1980s had a rate of just forty-five per 100,000.[6]

English life in this period truly was, as the political theorist Thomas Hobbes later observed (of what he called 'the state of nature'), 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. Even for a prosperous Norfolk family like the Pastons, there could be little security. John Paston's wife Margaret was ejected bodily from her lodgings when she sought to uphold the family's rightful claim to the manor of Gresham, occupied by the previous owner's heir. Caister Castle had been left to the Pastons by Sir John Fastolf, but it was besieged by the Duke of Norfolk shortly after John Paston's death and held for seventeen long years.[7] And England was among the more prosperous and less violent countries in Europe. Life was even nastier, more brutal and shorter in France – and it got steadily worse the further east you went in Europe. Even in the early eighteenth century the average Frenchman had a

daily caloric intake of 1,660, barely above the minimum required to sustain human life and about half the average in the West today. The average pre-revolutionary Frenchman stood just 5 feet 4¾ inches tall.[8] And in all the continental countries for which we have data for the medieval period, homicide rates were higher than in England, with Italy – a land as famous for its assassins as for its artists – consistently the worst.

It is sometimes argued that Western Europe's very nastiness was a kind of hidden advantage. Because high mortality rates were especially common among the poor, perhaps they somehow helped the rich to get richer. Certainly, one consequence of the Black Death was to give European per-capita income a boost; those who survived could earn higher wages because labour was so scarce. It is also true that the children of the rich in England were a good deal more likely to survive into adulthood than those of the poor.[9] Yet it seems unlikely that these quirks of European demography explain the great divergence of West and East. There are countries in the world today where life is almost as wretched as it was in medieval England, where pestilence, hunger, war and murder ensure average life expectancy stays pitifully low, where only the rich live long. Afghanistan, Haiti and Somalia show little sign of benefiting from these conditions. As we shall see, Europe leapt forward to prosperity and power despite death, not because of it.

Modern scholars and readers need to be reminded what death used to be like. *The Triumph of Death*, the visionary masterwork of the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder (*c.* 1525–69), is not of course a work of realism, but Bruegel certainly did not have to rely entirely on his imagination to depict a scene of stomach-wrenching death and destruction. In a land ruled by an army of skeletons, a king lies dying, his treasure of no avail, while a dog gnaws on a nearby corpse. In the background we see two hanged men on gibbets, four men broken on wheels and another about to be beheaded. Armies clash, houses burn, ships sink. In the foreground, men and women, young and old, soldiers and civilians are all driven pell-mell into a narrow, square tunnel. No one is spared. Even the troubadour singing to his mistress is surely doomed. The artist himself died in his early forties, a younger man than this author.

A century later the Italian artist Salvator Rosa painted perhaps the most moving of all *memento mori*, entitled simply *L'umana fragilità* ('Human Frailty'). It was inspired by the plague that had swept his native Naples in 1655, claiming the life of his infant son, Rosalvo, as well as carrying off his brother, his sister, her husband and five of their children. Grinning hideously, the angel of death looms from the darkness behind Rosa's wife to claim their son, even as he makes his first attempt to write. The mood of the heartbroken artist is immortally summed up in just eight Latin words inscribed on the canvas:

Conceptio culpa
Nasci pena
Labor vita
Necesse mori

'Conception is sin, birth is pain, life is toil, death is inevitable.' What more succinct description could be devised of life in the Europe of that time?