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**New Series, Number 21**

## China:

### Why a sophisticated Empire could not modernise

by Gwydion M Williams

How the strengths of China's traditional and highly stable culture got in the way of modernisation when the Opium Wars forced it to change.

The exceptional nature of the European developments that preceded the Industrial Revolution and the Age of Imperialism.

How Japan managed to modernise without uprooting its traditional culture. And how the same thing might have happened in China, but was prevented by the wrong people being in the right places at the right times.

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## **What Was China before 1949?**

China in 1949 chose to turn its back on the West and go its own way. It has continued to do despite an apparent opening-up under Deng. (Itself a continuation of a process begun by Mao, who made peace with the USA in the early 1970s.)

For most Westerners, the emergence of 'Red China' was an inexplicable; a baffling outbreak of evil and foolishness. But the actual history of China says something else. China had tried most of the other possibilities before turning to Communism.

Traditional China could sensibly be called Yellow China. Yellow was the Imperial colour. Most Chinese defined themselves as 'Children of the Yellow Emperor', a legendary figure regarded as the founder of their civilisation.<sup>1</sup>

(It has nothing to do with the 19<sup>th</sup> century European concept of a 'Yellow Race', which included various other East Asian peoples with cultural origins quite independent of China. Genetic studies show that human diversity cannot be

sensible split into a number of distinct races. Europeans seem to be a mix of African West Asian elements. The oldest population were hunters with blue eyes, black or brown hair, and dark skin.<sup>2</sup>)

To begin at the beginning: the unchanging 'yellow' civilisation of Imperial China gets a bad press nowadays. It had plenty of faults, indeed. But Europe's take-off in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries would not have been possible without a slew of inventions that 'Yellow China' had made since the European high-points of Classical Greece and the Roman Empire. Europe's era of domination was only possible because of paper, the printing press, gunpowder and the magnetic compass, all of which were developed in China:

The Chinese invented the compass and were the first to use it in navigation. During the Song-Yuan period, merchant ships from China, Persia, and Arabia were very active on the high seas... The Chinese art of printing became known to Japan during the eighth century. It was introduced to Korea during the tenth century and to Egypt during the twelfth century or perhaps a little earlier. Not until the thirteenth century did the

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow\\_Emperor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_Emperor)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/jan/26/swarthy-blue-eyed-caveman-dna-tooth>

Il-Khanate of Persia learn it and then introduced it to Africa and Europe. Towards the end of the fourteenth century block printing appeared for the first time in Europe. Movable type was invented in China during the eleventh century. It was introduced into Korea during the thirteenth century and to Europe at a later date.

The introduction of firearms to the West was closely related to the Mongols' western campaign early in the thirteenth century... During their military campaigns in Central Asia and Persia, the Mongols used weapons made of gunpowder. Fighting with the Mongols, the Arabs learned the use of firearms. The Europeans learned the use of firearms in the same fashion.<sup>3</sup>

Classical China was a society that worked well in its own terms. Well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was widely admired by foreign visitors. It had none of the self-destructive inner tensions of Europe. No one cared much what you believed or how you worshiped, so long as your beliefs did not make you a rebel against the political authorities. No one in China was expecting the End of the World, a great preoccupation for many of the Puritan pioneers of British industry. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese thinkers did not view their own past as sinful in the way Europe's Puritans did. Nor did they see it as foolish, as the Enlightenment and the Radical Deists mostly did.

Classical China was also lucky enough never to have had philosophers like Plato and Aristotle – or else to have forgotten them if they existed. Socrates and his pupils were brilliant at successfully claiming knowledge that they did not have. Plato's Earth-centred model of the solar system (outlined in *The Republic*) easily defeated rival Greek thinkers who had correctly deduced that at least some of the planets must go round the sun. Socrates' pupils Critias and Alcibiades nearly ruined Athens between them: Critias created a brutal and unsuccessful oligarchy while Alcibiades defected to Athens's rival Sparta after being sacked from leadership of a major military expedition. While Athens was still recovering from this,

Plato's well-intentioned but unrealistic advice to the rulers of Syracuse did immense damage to Greek-Sicily's leading city. Messed up a growing city-state that might have unified the Greek world in a gentler and more productive manner than the later Macedonian conquest.

Phillip of Macedon hired Aristotle to teach advanced knowledge to his son Alexander and to the generation of hereditary nobles who should have been his close supporters. But this group ripped Alexander's realm to pieces after his death, murdering Alexander's son and other legitimate claimants.

As a practical guide to good living in the face of the temptations of power, the Socratic school were worse than useless. They could talk eloquently about virtue, but smuggled in shoddy ideas amidst their complex webs of words. Their most remarkable achievement was to be thought wise despite the visible damage that they did.

Chinese philosophy was another matter – the leading schools produced useful results. The standard picture is of a ruthless 'School of Law' reunifying the realm under the Qin First Emperor, followed by nice Confucians making a harmonious society. I suspect that this is much too simple a view: Chinese philosophy was sorted out into different 'schools' by scholars in the Han Dynasty. The Han Dynasty began as successful rebels against the Qin dynasty, but then built a formidable new order of their own. Still, a unified realm that had been created with ruthlessness was only sustained because most people found it an excellent way of life. Without modern technology, you could not easily build an advanced culture that encouraged civilised life and that could *also* deal with rampaging nomadic warriors and other would-be conquerors.

Confucianism was widely admired in 18th century Europe. Before the rise of modern industry, Confucianism was the only creed with strong political power that was not burdened by a mass of superstition. Many people who've looked

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<sup>3</sup> Bai Shouyi (editor), *An Outline History Of China*, pages 325-6

at the link think that the example of China was a big inspiration to the European Enlightenment. The decision by the Papacy to end the Jesuit mission to China was entirely sensible if you started from a viewpoint that traditional Catholicism was true and needed to be defended against subtle heresies. The Jesuits were making progress among educated Chinese with a disguised version of Catholicism, but there was a real question about who was converting who.<sup>4</sup> If Christians could view Chinese ancestor-worship as a harmless cultural oddity, then why not take exactly the same view of Transubstantiation, the Resurrection and other miraculous happenings?

But Confucianism was only rational up to a point. I don't think it ever claimed that there was any underlying logic to its traditions. It successfully marginalised Buddhism – education remained Confucian, unlike most countries where Buddhism is widespread. The Buddhist monks had no control over most of those who got educated or what they were taught. I suppose Tibetan Buddhism also had its role, a creed with reputed mystical powers that was also safely far away from the centres of wealth and power, lands that were very nearly useless from a Confucian point of view.

(There's also a theory that the central Chinese government intentionally spread Buddhism in both Tibet and Mongolia, as a way of pacifying what had been fierce tribesmen. It is definite that it arrived in Tibet with a Chinese princess: Princess Wencheng who married the Tibetan king. Supporters of Tibet independence mostly ignore this awkward little detail, one of the best-recorded facts of Tibetan history, even though the lady is still celebrated by a major shrine in Lhasa.)

For government of the Chinese core, Confucianism rested mostly on customs that went back many thousands of years and were regarded as unchanging. These authentically went back at least twenty-five

centuries, to the teachings of Confucius that any educated Chinese could read in the original ideograms. Confucius in turn regarded himself as re-stating a vastly older creed, going back another fifteen or twenty-five centuries. The truth of the matter is hard to settle, but the 'oracle bones' from 650 or more years before Confucius use recognisable ideograms and have some common sentiments.<sup>5</sup>

The Chinese tradition had been rule by a scholar-gentry chosen mostly by merit, serving a dynasty but standing in place of the hereditary nobles of most civilisations. Exams were used to some extent by the Han Dynasty, which existed at the same time as the Roman Empire. Exams became the norm under the Tang Dynasty, which shone brightly during Europe's Dark Ages. The system meant that the rich or well-born couldn't automatically claim a place among the scholar-gentry: they had to educate their children in Confucian virtues and these children also had to be clever. Very clever children from ordinary backgrounds might also get in and be fully accepted.

This structure had huge conservative power. Crisis only threatened legal authority, rarely the social order. The permeation of governmental practice by the agreed ideals of Confucian society was rendered almost complete by the examination system. Moreover, though it was very hard for anyone not assured of some wealth to support himself during the long studies necessary for the examination - writing in the traditional literary forms itself took years to master - the principle of competition ensured that a continuing search for talent was not quite confined to the wealthier and established gentry families; China was a meritocracy in which learning always provided some social mobility. From time to time there were corruption and examples of the buying of places, but such signs of decline usually appear towards the end of a dynastic period. For the most part, the imperial officials showed remarkable independence of their background. They were not supposed to act on such assumptions of obligation to family and

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<sup>4</sup> This interesting insight was made by Brendan Clifford during an informal discussion of the matter

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<sup>5</sup> Confucius was born 551 BC. The oldest known Oracle Bones are dated to at least 1200 BC, and are already a well-developed script.

connexion as characterized the public servants drawn from the eighteenth-century English gentry. The civil servants were the emperor's men; they were not allowed to own land in the province where they served, serve in their own provinces, or have relatives in the same branch of government. They were not the representatives of a class, but a selection from it, an independently recruited elite, renewed and promoted by competition. They made the state a reality.

Imperial China was thus not an aristocratic polity; political power did not pass by descent within a group of noble families, though noble birth was socially important. Only in the small closed circle of the court was hereditary access to office possible, and there it was a matter of prestige, titles and standing, rather than of power. To the imperial counsellors who had risen through the official hierarchy to its highest levels and had become more than officials, the only rivals of importance were the court eunuchs. These creatures were often trusted with great authority by the emperors because, by definition, they could not found families. They were thus the only political force escaping the restraints of the official world.

Clearly, in the Chinese state there was little sense of the European distinction between government and society. Official, scholar and gentleman were usually the same man, combining many roles which in Europe were increasingly to be divided between governmental specialists and the informal authorities of society. He combined them, too, within the framework of an ideology which was much more obviously central to society than any to be found elsewhere than perhaps in Islam. The preservation of Confucian values was not a light matter, nor satisfiable by lip-service. The bureaucracy maintained those values by exercising a moral supremacy somewhat like that long exercised by the clergy in the West - and in China there was no Church to rival the state. The ideas which inspired it were profoundly conservative; the predominant administrative task was seen to be the maintenance of the established order; the aim of Chinese government was to oversee, conserve and consolidate, and occasionally to innovate in practical matters by carrying out large public works. Its overriding goals were regularity and the maintenance of common standards in a huge and diverse empire, where many district magistrates were divided from the people in their charge even

by language. In achieving its conservative aims, the bureaucracy was spectacularly successful and its ethos survived intact across all the crises of the dynasties.<sup>6</sup>

Though traditional China was imperfect by modern standards, those standards did not exist at the time. Traditional China noticed the outside world but saw nothing it liked better than its own norms. It had few aspirations beyond more of the same. There were some surprising deficiencies, including a failure to notice the famous Oracle Bones, pieces of turtle-shell or bones inscribed with archaic Chinese writing. They were used as a medicine for a long time in traditional China: their real meaning was not noticed by Chinese scholars until 1899, when Western ideas had already changed everything. But traditional China had for long periods been content with what it had, which Western Europe never was after it turned Christian.

By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Islam had largely pushed Christianity out of Asia. Europe was given a strong incentive to try to bypass the Islamic world and re-establish contact with rich non-Islamic 'Cathay'. That was Columbus's aim when he found the New World, the achievement that vastly accelerated Europe's world-wide seizure of seas and oceans. But the civilised Far East was unimpressed by Europe's sea-nomads. When the Pope overturned a compromise reached by Jesuit missionaries that had accepted traditional Chinese reverence for their ancestors, a Chinese Emperor commented:

Every country must have some spirits that it reveres. This is true of our dynasty, as for Mongols and Mohammedans... But in this Catholic faith, the Society of Peter quarrels with the Jesuits... and among the Jesuits the Portuguese want only their own nationals in their church while the French want only French in theirs. This violates the principles of religion. Such dissension cannot be inspired by the Lord of Heaven but by the Devil, who, I have heard Westerners say, leads men to do evil since he

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<sup>6</sup> Roberts, J. M. *The Penguin History Of The World*, Penguin Books 1995, page 434-435

can't do otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

It was not only Puritans who found something of the 'anti-Christ' in the Papacy. Almost every power that's had dealings with the Popes has ended up appalled by the pride and greed of the Vatican machine, an imbalance that infects even men of great personal piety and modesty. Protestors included many Catholics loyal to the old Latin-Christian traditions, who were unable to accept innovations like Transubstantiation and Papal Infallibility.

China was different. There were some brutal rulers across the centuries, but the brutality was usually for a clear end, the creation of a peaceful Empire. On the whole, peace and harmony was achieved.

### **Thirty-Five Imperial Centuries**

The Qin First Emperor never claimed to be China's very first ruler. He probably saw himself as renewing and improving a very old pattern of Imperial power. His title describes him as 'First Sovereign Qin Emperor', with the expectation that the new dynasty would be at least as long-lasting as the earlier Xia, Shang and Chou. His heirs were to be Second Qin Emperor, Third Qin Emperor etc. – but both were short-lived and the Third was also the last.

Chinese tradition as we know it today was handed down to us via the official histories of the Han dynasty, which re-unified China after a period of chaos in which the Qin were overthrown. This Han version spoke of three earlier dynasties: the Xia, Shang and Chou. The Shang used to be viewed as legendary, but have long since been proven to exist. We can even read their writing in the 'oracle bones' that I mentioned earlier. Shang writing is also not a primitive script: it looks sophisticated and must have had a long history behind it. The Xia Dynasty that supposedly existed before the Shang may also turn out to be real: that is still being debated.<sup>8</sup>

China was the last-emergent of the four great River Valley civilisations in which the main concepts of civilisation were standardised and popularised. Oldest of all is Mesopotamia, though its city-states may have been inspired by even older cities nearby – Catal Huyuk in Anatolia is the most ancient we have so far found.

Mesopotamia as it existed more than 7000 years ago made urban life stable and sustainable. Both Egypt and the Indus Valley civilisation used crops developed in Mesopotamia: ancient China shows much less sign of direct influence and had crops of its own, millet and later rice derived directly from East Asian wild plants. There was probably outside inspiration: Chinese legends have a series of heroic figures before the Xia Dynasty, inventors of the arts of civilisation. Fascinating figures like the Yellow Emperor, a sage-king who was both a successful military leader and the inventor of medicine, and is credited as the ancestor of all Han Chinese.

(It is interesting to note that Chinese legends show the early rulers as primarily creators of a new way of life. Only secondarily generals or warriors, if indeed they fought at all. For most Chinese, war was only admired if it created peace.)

China also remained a single slow-changing civilisations with no sharp breaks before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Egypt and Mesopotamia both fell to outside conquerors and cultural continuity was lost. Two centuries ago, no one could read the Egyptian hieroglyphs or the various Mesopotamian scripts and languages. They remained mysterious until modern Europeans began investigating them. Both Egypt and Mesopotamia (Iraq) now define themselves as Arab and Muslim.

Egypt's first dynasty is traditionally dated to 3100 BC, and its traditions were broken when the Ptolemaic dynasty ended with the death of Cleopatra 7th and her son Caesarean in 30 BC. The tradition had been damaged by the Greek conquest of Egypt, but the Ptolemaic rulers used many Egyptian forms. These were retained even when they came under the

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<sup>7</sup> Yap, Yong and Cotterell, Arthur. *Chinese Civilisation: From the Ming Revival to Chairman Mao*, page 83

<sup>8</sup> Chinese archaeologists identify it with the Erlitou culture

domination of Rome. But Octavian's defeat of Anthony and Cleopatra was followed by Egypt's absorption as a province of the Roman Empire. So that makes thirty-one centuries.

China could be said to have existed from around 2000 BC if you accept the Xia dynasty as historic. But since this is disputed, I'll start from 1600 BC, the Shang Dynasty. This tradition lasted with various breaks till the abdication of the last Manchu emperor in February 1912, which makes at least thirty-five centuries. Shang ideograms are the direct ancestors of the ideograms used today. The language they spoke is the ancestor of today's Standard Chinese (Mandarin) and of the various Chinese dialects, some of which are thought to be closer to the original.

The only major culture that might be older is India. The Indus Valley or Harappan Civilization dates back to 3300 BC, much older than similar developments in what is now China. But the cultural and social continuity of the Harappans with Hindu civilisation is disputed. The political system and history is unknown, but there is a notable lack of buildings that appear to be palaces or temples, suggesting no kings or priests raised above the general population. (I say more about this in an appendix to this article.)

Even if Indian civilisation should turn out to be old, China is remarkable for having repeatedly unified its civilisation as a single powerful state.

Ancient China seems to have emerged by the merger of several similar but distinct traditions in the north-east of the current People's Republic. Kingdoms found mostly along the Yellow River, with an extension down to the Yangtze. Whatever they were, they were definitely unified under the Shang and Chou. Remained similar enough for the Qin and Han conquest to be seen as a reunification of people who belonged together.

The modern Han people are more a cultural than an ethnic unit: they cross the divide between the wider Northern Mongolian and Southern Mongolian ethnic groups. North Chinese have more in

common genetically with Koreans and Japanese than with South Chinese, who resemble the Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians. As one Westerner put it:

We take this seeming unity of China so much for granted that we forget how astonishing it is... North and South Chinese are genetically and physically rather different: North Chinese are most similar to Tibetans and Nepalese, while South Chinese are similar to Vietnamese and Filipinos. My North and South Chinese friends can often distinguish each other at a glance by physical appearance: the North Chinese tend to be taller, heavier, paler, with more pointed noses, and with smaller eyes that appear more 'slanted'.

North and South China differ in environment and climate as well: the north is drier and colder; the south, wetter and hotter. Genetic differences arising in those differing environments imply a long history of moderate isolation between peoples of North and South China. How did those peoples nevertheless end up with the same or very similar languages and cultures?<sup>9</sup>

Only culture linked the bundle of ethnic groups who became the core of China. But the culture of the 'Yellow Empire' was a very powerful one, the most successful large-scale solution to the problems of running a non-industrial civilisation.

The difficulties of the process are often underestimated. Things that we now take for granted had to be painfully evolved. The first cities led on to what I'll call an Advanced Agricultural Civilisation, a state that combines a number of cities and the countryside between them. They began in the Neolithic: there was often much more continuity between the Neolithic beginning and their various Bronze Age and Iron Age successors than between different civilisations that used the same metal technology.

Archaic China had a reasonably good social organisation during its Bronze Age, the days of the Shang and Chou. In the later and more warlike Iron Age, first the Qin and then the Han managed to update this tradition to something much richer economically and more formidable

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<sup>9</sup> Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs & Steel*, page 323



militarily. Their state existed at the same time as that of the heirs of Alexander and then the Roman Empire, but in as far as we can estimate from archaeology, China was larger and better organised. The two gigantic Empires were separate by thousands of miles of steppe and mountain and so never clashed, but in terms of trade China was the stronger. China caused a drain of precious metals from the Roman Empire to pay for luxuries like silk.

China also did not see the radical shifts in culture that happened in West Asia, Mesopotamian to Persian to Macedonian-Greek to Latin-Roman, reverting to Romanised Greek when Constantine shifted the Empire's capital to Byzantium. And then getting disrupted in turn by the Arab / Muslim conquest. And finally the Turks – originally from the fringes of China – invading and making their own empires which lasted into the 20th century.

Chinese rulers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could look back to more than two thousand years of successful government. Not a static society, but a society where any literate individual could read books written centuries in the past without the need for translations. Where past examples were considered very relevant to modern problems.

But while it was not static, it was also not a society that could compete with Europe after Europe's development of science and modern industry. Modern Europe's rate of change and progress was much faster and more dramatic than anything the world had previously seen.

If you have a delivery business that relies on horse-drawn carts, you probably go out of business if someone introduces lorries. It's not that the horse-drawn carts are any worse than they used to be: they have just been overtaken. Likewise China had accumulated significant inventions over the centuries, but maybe no more than two or three per century. Suddenly Europe was producing dozens of significant inventions per decade, and was also constantly re-inventing itself without much thought for the consequences.

China could not match that without breaking itself apart and wholly remoulding itself. No ruler before Mao was able or willing to do this.

18th century Europe was slow to recognise its advantage. Europeans in those days mostly saw China as an admirable place. In *The Wealth Of Nations* – a book more often cited than read carefully – Adam Smith praised it as an advanced and rational Empire, while also noting the poverty of its lower orders:

China is a much richer country than any part of Europe, and the difference between the price of subsistence in China and in Europe is very great. Rice in China is much cheaper than wheat is any where in Europe.<sup>10</sup>

In China, a country much richer than any part of Europe, the value of precious metals is much higher than in any part of Europe. As the wealth of Europe, indeed, has increased greatly since the discovery of the mines of America, so the value of gold and silver has gradually diminished.<sup>11</sup>

The retinue of a grandee in China or Indostan [sic] accordingly is, by all accounts, much more numerous and splendid than that of the richest subjects in Europe... in manufacturing art and industry, China and Indostan, though inferior, seem not to be much inferior to any part of Europe. The money price of the greater part of manufactures, therefore, will naturally be much lower in those great empires than it is any-where in Europe.<sup>12</sup>

China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in the world. It seems, however, to have been long stationary. Marco Polo, who visited it more than five hundred years ago, describes its cultivation, industry, and populousness, almost in the same terms in which they are described by travellers in the present times. It had perhaps, even long before his time, acquired that full complement of riches which the nature of its laws and institutions permits it to acquire...The poverty of the lower ranks of people in China far surpasses that of the

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, Adam. *The Wealth Of Nations*, Glasgow Edition of 1976. I.xi.e.24, page 208

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., I.xi.n, page 255

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., I.XI.g, pages 223-4

most beggarly nations in Europe.<sup>13</sup>

Adam Smith was wrong in thinking that China had been static since the days of Marco Polo. It had achieved a much bigger population, and the poverty he notes may have been due to this. But he correctly puts 18th century China and India on a level with Europe:

As through the greater part of Europe, the church, so in many different countries of Asia, the state, is principally supported by a land-tax, proportioned, not to the rent, but to the produce of the land. In China, the principal revenue of the sovereign consists in a tenth part of the produce of all the lands of the empire. This tenth part, however, is estimated so very moderately, that, in many provinces, it is said not to exceed a thirtieth part of the ordinary produce. The land-tax or land rent which used to be paid to the Mahometan [sic] government of Bengal, before that country fell into the hands of the English East India Company, is said to have amounted to about a fifth part of the produce. The land-tax of ancient Egypt is said likewise to have amounted to a fifth part.

In Asia, this sort of land-tax is said to interest the sovereign in the improvement and cultivation of land. The sovereigns of China, those of Bengal while under the Mahometan government, and those of ancient Egypt, are said accordingly to have been extremely attentive to the making and maintaining of good roads and navigable canals, in order to increase, as much as possible, both the quantity and value of every part of the produce of the land, by procuring to every part of it the most extensive market which their own dominions could afford. The tithe of the church is divided into such small portions, that no one of its proprietors can have any interest of this kind. The parson of a parish could never find his account in making a road or canal to a distant part of the country, in order to extend the market for the produce of his own particular parish. Such taxes, when destined for the maintenance of the state, have some advantages which may serve in some measure to balance their inconveniency. When destined for the maintenance of the church, they are attended with nothing but inconveniency.<sup>14</sup>

The New Right idolised Adam Smith,

but don't seem to actually read him. Or else they self-censor what they read to avoid 'off-message' facts. One fellow has a whole book about Adam Smith and makes many references to China, but avoids all the insights that I've quoted.<sup>15</sup> He has just a rather trivial quote in which Smith speaks about the excellence of China's roads and navigable canals, along with a note suggesting that is tourist exaggeration. If you know the basics of British economic history, you'd know that British inland transport was indeed lousy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, despite a wave of canal-building. China from ancient times had the Grand Canal, generally reckoned as the world's longest, stretching more than a thousand miles from Hangzhou south of modern Shanghai as far as Beijing in the north.

Adam Smith is supposedly the foundation of the New Right world-view. But he said a lot of things that are not compatible with the New Right view, including recognising 18<sup>th</sup> century China as richer than Europe. The logic of such a recognition is that the Opium Wars and the forcible opening-up of China were acts of vandalism, done at a time when Chinese had no reason to think that European ways were better than theirs. You could make an excellent case that China would have adjusted to Western ways better if they'd been given time to observe and change, especially since the Manchu Dynasty was moribund and would probably have fallen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century even if the West had kept its distance. Violent intervention was not inevitable, nor always seen as desirable by Europeans. The philosopher Kant saw China and Japan as interesting alternatives, while Napoleon famously saw China as a 'sleeping giant', best left alone.

It would have taken no great ingenuity for someone on the New Right to give such an approach a pro-capitalist 'spin'. They might say that the interests of the monopolistic opium-producing East India

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., I.viii.24, page 89.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., V.ii.d 4-5, page 838

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<sup>15</sup> O'Rourke, P. J. *On The Wealth of Nations*, Atlantic Books 2007. This book has a self-confidence matched only by its profound lack of insight. It is blandly confident about the merits of current European fashions in ideas. Naturally it was well received by reviewers.

Company had been foolishly put ahead of a healthy growth of home-grown capitalism in China. But the New Right are very much rooted in the Anglo history. Most of them are reluctant to accept that Anglos were ever less than perfect, even when their own background is something else. Shrewder people might have seen the advantage of admitting some faults in order to win over people from different cultural backgrounds – yet the New Right also have to keep up their alliance with the Old Right. To be politically powerful they need the votes and general confidence of people who are often ex-Colonial and/or Christian bigots, people who are quite certain that Anglos were always virtuous and clever. Rather than admit 'off-message facts' to the hallowed sanctum of 'recent research by reliable sources', all of the New Rightist I've come across preferred to ignore or deny anything that might offend Anglo prejudices.

The New Right also favor a 'Post-Truthful' approach, a doctrine they probably picked up from some of the less-effective Western Marxists who were operating in the confusion of the 1970s. This philosophical mishmash, which is a direct opposite of Marx's own Historic Materialism, tends towards a view that things you don't observe don't actually exist. This might seem puzzling to anyone who'd ever stubbed their foot on a stone they hadn't thought was there, or eaten or drunk something they thought was fit for human consumption and turned out otherwise. It would also make it difficult to understand how you can get lost while reading a map that you believe to be correct. Put baldly, the doctrine is obvious nonsense. It tends to be put more subtly by its practitioners.

Within the complexities of a human culture, it's quite true that what people believe to be true can be at least as important as what is actually true. Fashions sprout and go to absurd lengths, once enough people decide that this is the 'next big thing'. And in the world of finance, 'Post-Truthfulness' was a great success for many years, yielding millions

to its practitioners. Reality stuck back in 2008, based on the minor detail that the actual material wealth of the world was considerably less than what people thought they owned. Ever since we have had austerity, seeking to reduce the real wealth spent on ordinary people and solidify the paper gains of the 1%.

To get back to China's peculiar destiny, I'll look again at why China took many decades before it could efficiently absorb Western knowledge. Why it needed Marxism-Leninism in order to create effective modern politics. And why it had ended up producing a hybrid that may prove better than the original.

### **Useful Despotisms**

'Public opinion' was not something that existed in traditional China. The various dynasties that existed across the millennia interacted with local officials and landlords, and had little contact with ordinary people. This got in the way of attempts to modernise. Though some of Kuomintang admired European Fascism, they were not able to build the organic links that did genuinely connect Fascist governments to a clear majority of those they classed as 'their people'. In China the masses had almost always been passive, rising only occasionally to overthrow a dynasty and establish a new dynasty that would soon be just as remote. This could not go on after the Opium Wars opened up China to the wider world: functional links to the bulk of the population became essential. Things that had taken centuries in Europe needed to be done in just a few years. And wherever such drastic changes were planned or needed, an autocratic ruler was needed. As one Victorian writer put it:

Despotism is a legitimate form of government in dealing with barbarians, provided that it aims at improving things and it uses means that actually do bring improvement. Liberty, as a principle, doesn't apply to any state of affairs prior to the time when mankind become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one - i.e. to find a

despot so wise. But in all nations with which we need to concern ourselves here, the people long ago became able to be guided to self-improvement by conviction or persuasion; and once that stage has been reached, compulsion is no longer admissible as a means to their own good.<sup>16</sup>

Surprisingly, that is John Stuart Mill in his famous essay *On Liberty*. Of course China already had a high civilisation, and Mill knew it. Yet it's quite possible he'd have been happy to endorse a new wave of autocratic modernisation in China, if it had happened in his time and in line with his ideas. He did say:

We have a warning example in China – a nation of much talent, and even much wisdom in some respects. This is due to China's rare good fortune in having been provided at an early period with a particularly good set of customs that were partly the work of men to whom even the most enlightened European must grant the title of sages and philosophers (with certain limitations). The Chinese are remarkable, too, in the excellence of their apparatus for implanting (as far as possible) the best wisdom they have in every mind in the community, and seeing to it that those who have acquired the most of that wisdom occupy the positions of honour and power. Surely – you might think – the people who did this have discovered the secret of human progressiveness, and must have kept themselves steadily at the head of the movement of the world. On the contrary, they have become stationary - have remained so for thousands of years – and if they are ever to be further improved it must be by foreigners.<sup>17</sup>

That overestimates the degree to which China had remain unchanged. He was partly right in seeing that further improvement would need to be made by foreigners, though in the event it was done by Chinese who absorbed Leninism, whereas those who tried to copy Mill or other liberal thinkers were ineffective. (The Kuomintang achieved virtually nothing until it absorbed a great deal of Leninism during its time in alliance with the Soviet Union.)

Mill makes a very interesting point about the perils of too much uniformity. Maybe Europe's divisions and diversity was strength in the long run. Mill definitely saw China as an example of what could go wrong:

They [the Chinese] have succeeded beyond all hope in doing what English philanthropists are so industriously working at, namely making a people all alike, all governing their thoughts and conduct by the same maxims and rules; and these – the Chinese people of today – are the fruits of that success. The modern regime of public opinion is an unorganized version of what the Chinese educational and political systems have in an organized form; and unless individuality can successfully assert itself against this yoke, Europe, despite its noble antecedents and its professed Christianity, will tend to become another China.

What is it that has so far preserved Europe from this fate? What has made the European family of nations an improving rather than a stationary portion of mankind? It's not that they are more excellent than the Chinese; when excellence exists it is an effect of improvement, not a cause. Rather, it is the remarkable diversity of character and culture among the Europeans.<sup>18</sup>

Mill implicitly supported the actual policies of the day, China being busted open so as to change it. He ignored the Taiping, who were still strong in 1859 when he wrote *On Liberty*. And he even supported the opium trade:

On the other hand, there are questions relating to interference with trade that are essentially questions of liberty ... the prohibition on importing opium into China, the restriction of the sale of poisons; all cases, in short, where the object of the interference is to make it hard or impossible to obtain a particular commodity. These interferences are objectionable as infringements on the liberty not of the producer or seller but of the buyer.<sup>19</sup>

But supposing the buyer would like to quit but can't? If a large proportion of opium users end up wishing they had never started, then a government is justified in anticipating such a viewpoint

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<sup>16</sup> Mill, John Stewart, *On Liberty*. Chapter 1. The entire text is available on-line at [<http://www.bartleby.com/130/>]

<sup>17</sup> Mill, John Stewart, *On Liberty*. Chapter 3.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, . Chapter 6.

and stopping fresh customers getting 'hooked'. Justified also in treating existing addicts as victims and forcibly 'cleaning them up', which happened in the early years of Mao's rule. China was pretty much drug-free while Mao ruled: addiction and also prostitution have returned in less extreme forms since Deng liberalised the system.

### **Engines of Creation**

Some experts claim Chinese culture had lost its dynamism by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, having been very impressive in the past. But they can't agree when this great transformation occurred. Was the Tang Dynasty the last time China was dynamic? But the subsequent Sung dynasty produced the key breakthrough of gunpowder. Did Chinese creativeness freeze up after the Sung were overrun by the Mongols? The Ming Dynasty was dynamic enough to sail to East Africa in ships superior to anything Europe had at the time.

Had the Ming Chinese discovered the New World and its gold-rich cultures, world history might have gone differently. But Zheng He's fleet did not strike out into the open ocean seeking unknown lands, as Columbus did. They stuck to coasts and known places. They might have sailed Due East had they been as interested in making contact with Europe as Europe was interested in making contact with them. But 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe would have appeared to China as a cold and impoverished fringe beyond the Islamic World. Even if some bold captain had set out, they might have travelled a thousand miles further than Columbus did without finding more than a few small islands, or perhaps nothing at all.

(I am aware of claims that the Chinese did indeed discover the New World and then did nothing about it, as made in a book called *1421*. I don't find this credible. Gold-fever in China was less intense than in Europe, but I can't believe that extensive empires with tons of gold ornaments and no horses or iron swords would have been ignored or forgotten about by Chinese

voyagers. It is remotely possible that their ships encountered impoverished tribal areas on the Pacific coast of North America or else beyond Africa in what is now Brazil and Argentina. These would have seemed less interesting than similar people much closer to home.)

China wasn't static when Europe cracked it open with the Opium Wars and other invasions. China's 'Yellow Empire' showed continuous slow creativity from first to last. How far it might have got without Europe's interruption is speculative. With just a scattering of inventions per century, it might have taken millennia to get as far as modern science and industry. Or perhaps it never could have managed that without a painful process of being broken apart and wholly remoulded, something that it would have resisted fiercely.

Some objective measure of creativity is needed to compare what the different civilisations did at different times. I've only seen one detailed attempt to do it, Charles Murray's book *Human Accomplishment*.<sup>20</sup> And thought it starts from an excellent idea, it is also a sadly flawed work, with defects I detailed a few years back:

[It] shows a rigid adherence to the 19th century [European] vision of 'Wonderful Greeks' followed by 'Wonderful Us'. In the 21st century world, he would not be taken seriously if he put this vision straightforwardly. And his figures [lists of human achievements] do include enough non-Westerners to make his figures plausible. Anyone likely to be reading his book would know that there were some: he gives plausible reasons for only listing a few...

The Classical Greeks, whose world-view was quite different from 19th century Euro-chauvinism, insisted that a lot of what they wrote was taken from Egyptian and Babylonian sources. The original thing in Greek maths was the idea of proof. Not just that a method worked, but there was some deeper reason why it would always work. This requirement for proof is a predictable product of cultures where there is debate and a circle of decision-makers who need

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<sup>20</sup> ] Murray, Charles. *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950*. HarperCollins 2003.

to be convinced by arguments. Not necessarily a democracy, even a limited democracy, but a system in which no one person had the last word. This meant that arguments had to become much more objective and impersonal.

What the Greeks lacked, unfortunately, was the right criteria for judgement. Rhetorical skills were dominant, while the idea of testing your notions against the material world was seen as vulgar. Plato helped close down Greek thought, by insisting that it was only the debased and corrupted nature of the material world that stopped it from matching his own beautiful theories.

We also cannot be certain that only the Greeks made progress in the direction of modern science. We know about the Greeks because the Macedonian Empire created a pattern of Greek-speaking states that served as a model for the Roman Empire and also influenced Islam in its early days. If Demosthenes of Athens had succeeded in curbing the ambitions of Phillip of Macedon and his son Alexander, then Demosthenes would be long forgotten. Even Athens would just be another minor name from the ancient world. It was the successful Hellenic Empires and their influence on Rome that preserved a fair chunk of Greek knowledge.

We depend on copies of copies of copies of Greek works that would otherwise be lost, since no original manuscripts survive. Had these works not survived from Hellenic and Roman copies, we'd know little or nothing about them. Even as things are, scholars find references to works by famous writers that were once valued but are now lost. Even writers who were seen as top-rank but whose entire output has perished.

Islam helped preserve the Greek heritage—the story of them burning the library of Alexandria is a total lie. But Muslims added a lot, as well as preserving. It was the Islamic world that worked out the key medical ideas of contagion and inoculation. Europeans were introduced to the idea of vaccination by the Islamic World, which had in the meantime lost its science and kept knowledge alive mostly by tradition. But Islam in its great days had devised Algebra, not listed by Murray even though he credits a Greek with its beginnings and later cites the distinct and much less important development of Boolean Algebra.

If you are looking for cause and effect,

Europe's take-off shows a dependence of many things besides the Greek heritage. British science and inventiveness was secured by its Royal Society, which drew its inspiration from Elizabethan courtier / philosopher Francis Bacon. Bacon identified printing, gunpowder and the magnetic compass as three key advances over the knowledge of the Greeks and Romans. But Joseph Needham has noted that all three were Chinese inventions, transmitted to Europe via the Islamic world. Murray certainly knows of Needham's work, but mentions it only to give excuses for discounting it. The key point that China devised Bacon's Big Three is ignored.

In technology, the Chinese get credited [by Murray] with using movable type before Guttenberg, but not for originating printing as such. The exact origins of block-printing are obscure, perhaps derived from pattern-making on silk cloth, but no one doubts that it started in China, probably in the 2nd century AD. The Roman Empire had mass production of written texts, but all based on copyists with pen and ink, a much slower and cruder method. Block-printing spread from China to the Islamic world and into mediaeval Europe, creating the context in which moveable type could be accepted as a valuable step forward.

Other inventions missing from Murray's list are the magnetic compass, the windmill and the wheelbarrow. Also the first efficient horse collar, unknown to Roman farmers whose system strangled the poor beast if it tried to use its full strength. Europeans were only able to use ploughs efficiently on heavy soils when this Chinese invention finally got to Europe, and Murray should know it but does not. He does credit China with the first use of stirrups, generally regarded as an invention of the steppe-nomads.

If you read the fine print, you find out why so many non-European 'Central Events' are missing. Murray explains how he had compiled a long list of 1,560 'significant events' from various source books. From these he chose 369 events that were mentioned in all the sources (Ibid., p 159). He also mentions that he breaks this rule when an event was missed by one source but he thinks it ought to qualify—he gives no clue as to how many times he has done this, nor who benefited from this flexibility.

A consequence of this method is that if 20 out

of 22 sources list the Arab discoverers of blood circulation and the Andromeda Nebula, they get 'outvoted' by two that do not. But everyone lists the first Europeans to do substantial work on any important matter, if only to say that they were rediscovering stuff that was already known. So the European gets a 'Central Event', while the Arab does not. Likewise it doesn't matter if most sources correctly recognise the non-European origins of iron bridges. Giving veto-power to mistaken listings ensures a reassuringly old-fashioned list. Dead White Europeans Rule OK.

European astronomy is build on the Greek system, which the Romans took over almost unchanged. Yet there is no serious doubt that the Classical Greek system was a simple copy of the Babylonian system. The gap in the traditional constellation pattern (covered by modern constellations like Horologium and the Southern Cross) is just that part of the sky that would not have been visible from ancient Mesopotamia—Greeks would have seen less, and Egyptians more. Also the 60-minute hour and the 60-second minute point to Babylon's unique base-60 maths. The 360 degrees of the circle may reflect some ancient schema that tried to reconcile it with a year of 365 and a fraction days.

Five Babylonian gods were identified with the five planets known to the ancients. (Uranus and the asteroid Vesta can also be seen by a keen-eyed observer who knows exactly what to look for, but no one seems to have spotted them before they were found using telescopes). From the five planets they knew, the Babylonians devised an astrology that outlived the rest of their culture. And obviously this astrology includes the simple realisation that Venus is a single object whether it appears as Morning Star or Evening Star. Murray credits this to a Greek, Pythagoras of Samos.

The Greeks copied their system of identifying planets with gods, substituting Aphrodite for Ishtar etc. The Roman repeated the trick, with Aphrodite becoming Venus. Different mythologies never match one-to-one, of course. Experts believe that the Roman Venus was originally a goddess of gardens and fields, but later picked up Aphrodite's role as a love goddess. Likewise the Greek Aphrodite differs significantly from Ishtar, who was also a goddess of war. Ishtar in her West-Semitic form of Astarte or Ashtoreth also

got identified with the Greek Selene (moon) and Artemis (huntress).

Interestingly, the Aztecs also saw the planet Venus as significant, but as a God of War. This is strikingly different from the Greek and Roman versions, but could be a remote derivation from the love-and-war goddess Ishtar. Possibly via the Phoenicians, who worshiped Astarte. We know from Greek sources that Phoenicians sailed all of the way round Africa on an expedition sponsored by an Egyptian Pharaoh. And the scholars of Alexandria believed that you could probably reach East Asia by sailing west... A shipload of Phoenicians arriving in the New World could have spread a lot of ideas, including the step-like pyramids that are found in both Mesopotamia and Central America.<sup>21</sup>

To get a real idea of 'Human Accomplishments', Murray's work needs to be re-done with the errors corrected. By all means use a cross-section of reference works to average out different views of what is significant. But where the actual origin is probable or confirmed, then that origin is a fact regardless of who doesn't know about it. I'm confident that non-European civilisations would then be seen as major centres of creativity, while a lot of what we think of as Greek would turn out to be a derivative of West Asian culture. Including the alphabet, of course, but the whole pattern of trading cities with republican constitutions was found among the Semitic Phoenicians before the Greeks adopted it. Some vital advances would be Hindu or Muslim, but a lot more would be Chinese.

On the other hand, I'm also pretty sure you'd also find Europe breaking all previous norms for creativity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, maybe also in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. And then you'd find it going higher again in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the United States also playing a role.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a considerable narrowing of the creativity gap, but the difference remains and there seems to be an enigmatic cultural 'engine of creation' centred in Old Europe. Murray avoids

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<sup>21</sup> *Human Accomplishments & Human Connections: What's mistaken and what's useful in Charles Murray's Human Accomplishment*, in *Problems of Capitalism & Socialism* No. 77, Autumn 2004

listing inventions or significant individual achievers per million of population, except in the case of the Jews, whose creativity per million is indeed quite remarkable. But I'm pretty certain that we in Old Europe produce many more high achievers per million than are produced by similar peoples settled in the USA. The WASP mainstream in the USA are good at business and at turning other people's inventions into cheap consumer goods. But there is much less originality: automobiles, computers and space travel were all European ideas. When there is an original US contribution, it is mostly from people settled in the USA but not born or raised there.

(Consider aircraft, mostly regarded as having been pioneered by the Wright Brothers. They are officially credited just with the "first recorded controlled, powered, sustained heavier than air flight".<sup>22</sup> John Stringfellow in England achieved the first powered flight in 1848, using an unmanned aircraft with a ten-foot wingspan. Several French inventors managed short powered flights later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though without much control. Brazilian Alberto Santos-Dumont made the first public flights of an aircraft, and there was some controversy before the Wright Brothers were officially classified as first. They were developers of an idea that had been around for decades and would definitely have been realised without them.)

The USA depends on outsiders or its own minorities for most of its achievements. Most of the good music is Afro-American, while most of the good science, literature, drama and other artistic achievement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is Jewish. A lot of the rest is from first-generation immigrants: there is something mind-numbing about the values that the USA's WASP mainstream has chosen for itself. Values that it would like to impose on the rest of the world, but that project has fortunately failed for now.

*(On a side issue, Murray also avoids*

*saying anything definite about the widespread belief that homosexuals are more creative, at least in the arts. His excuse is that you can't be certain about who was or was not homosexual. But you could glean enough from modern biographies to say which individuals were reasonably suspected of being homosexual or bisexual, and also which were believed celibate but of homosexual orientation. Another good reason to get Murray's study of creativity repeated by someone with no ideological stake in the outcome.)*

### **Breaking and Remaking China**

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China needed to learn a radically new way of thinking. It so happened that only the Chinese Communists were able to successfully blend this with existing Chinese culture. Part of the trouble may have been that a lot of Chinese were looking to the USA as the best model – the USA was sympathetic to non-white cultures having their own sovereign states, whereas most European countries up until the 1950s wanted to keep them as colonies. But the USA was synthesised from immigrants, people who arrived in a new land with values and outlooks drummed into them by centuries of development in Old Europe. Most US citizens assumed that these hard-won insights and social habits were 'natural' and could be easily transmitted – as indeed they were to *individuals* of alien origin who were willing to dissolve themselves into the existing social structures. Transmitting something like the US system to a foreign country is quite another matter, and the US has no idea how to do it. Rather, various US 'experts' have a whole host of notions: but none of them actually work, as was shown in Iraq after 2003.

The USA prides itself on having successfully sowed the seeds of multi-party democracy in Western Europe after World War Two. Actually it was doing no more than giving a fresh chance and a major boost to old-growth democracy and

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<sup>22</sup> [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_flying\\_machine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_flying_machine)]



parliamentarianism that had been developing nicely in Europe before World War One. Multi-party democracy had also begun in Japan before 1914 and continued into the 1920s, which made it much easier for it to flourish again after 1945.

Non-communist writers have generally been willing to credit Communists with the ability to transform backward societies, which was the opposite of what was expected from the original Marxist plan of history. As far as I know, all of them were content to 'score a point' about this odd fact and not ponder it further. Myself, I'm confident that it is because Marxism is the one creed that can give some general idea of how Western societies actually works to people who have not grow up as part of Western culture. Marxist analysis often gets things wrong, but most of it is written on the assumption that Western forms are not natural at all: that they are highly artificial and the product of centuries of social struggle. And that something wholly new had emerged in Western Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, by a series of painful rebellions by the middle class against an older order that had tried to stifle them. This seems to me to be a basic truth, regardless of what you think about possible 'next stages' beyond the current social systems.

Yellow China was not at all like Europe. The Chinese Empire had social classes that had the same economic role as the European 'bourgeois' or middle class, but those people had a completely different set of social aspirations. Their minds were focused on a set of traditional values with roots going back thousands of years. Values which some European and US visitors came to admire. Values which the Chinese did not want to let go of.

Were these values compatible with modern technology? Some Chinese nationalists say that China's dynamic was lost under the Quin, the final ruling dynasty that was created by the invading Manchus. But China under the Quin was still growing and changing. The New World crops that Europeans had found were taken up by Chinese peasants and led to a big growth

in population. Rich Chinese also imported window glass from Europe: glass had never been much used in China, but when it was easily available it was incorporated into the existing way of life.

Europe's core values could *not* be incorporated into the existing way of life, and so were ignored for as long as possible. Europe from the 16<sup>th</sup> century had produced a network of scientists who freely communicated with each other, publishing their results in Latin and initially accepting the Latin-Christian framework of thought. Other cultures had had brilliant inventors and some individual scientists with grand insights, but no such social network.

Other cultures also had a belief in esoteric knowledge and in the merits of hiding away your secrets among the 'inner circle, rather than such systems being confined mostly to cranks and charlatans as happened in Europe. Belief in Wonderful Secrets fits human nature rather better than the odd stilted style of science, where communications are depersonalised and where fierce jealousies are mostly hidden under a show of common purpose and the primacy of truth.

Individual genius was not enough, even in Europe, prior to the rise of a network of freely communicating scientists. Leonardo was just as gifted as an engineer and inventor as he was as a painter, but he used mirror-writing to conceal his interesting observations and ideas. People realised the importance of his non-artistic work only *after* others had rediscovered the same things.<sup>23</sup> Had he not been an astonishingly skilled artist, someone whose seemingly trivial doodles remained valuable, most likely all of his manuscripts would have perished. Perhaps other secretive researchers existed whose work did indeed perish without a trace.

The culture of scientific discovery was hard to devise. It remains a very difficult

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<sup>23</sup> White, Michael. *Leonardo da Vinci : The First Scientist*. Abacus 2001

culture to acquire even as an individual student immersed in a well-established scientific subculture. To import it as a living system into a different sort of society is harder again.

This difficulty applied even to those closest to the Latin-Christian tradition. The highly intelligent culture of European Judaism found it quite easy to adapt to modern business – but this wasn't hugely different from traditional trading and crafts, things that Jews had been doing long before anyone in Europe got beyond gift-exchange. But Judaism produced no significant scientists from within itself. From the 19th century, large numbers of individual Jews got drawn into the new world of thought that had been born out of the Latin-Christian tradition. Mostly this meant leaving a lot of their own background behind: almost all of the important Jewish scientists and social thinkers were non-believers, skeptics or deists, which is much less true of Jewish business people or politicians.

Economist David Ricardo was one of the earliest exiles from traditional Judaism: he had rejected the orthodox Jewish beliefs of his family and eloped with a Quaker lady at the age of 21. Spinoza was disowned as a heretic by his community. Karl Marx came from a Jewish family that had converted to Lutheranism. Einstein sometimes spoke of God, but thought about the matter in a quite different way from any religious Jew.

As a creed, Judaism is much saner and less malignant than Christianity. But it didn't produce science, though it did cherish a strong academic tradition that was easily translated into other modes of thought. A framework that gave some Jews a startlingly original outlook, able to notice gaps in concepts that had been accepted as solid common-sense to people from a Latin-Christian background.

The Latin-Christian tradition was created by Germanic barbarians swarming into the decaying Western Roman Empire. And it had some very interesting features that bore fruit in the long run. Its early stages don't really deserve the name 'Dark

Ages': they are dark to historians because there were few written records. Civilisation collapsed and there was a break in tradition, but this may have been a blessing in disguise. Perhaps one should say *'sometimes the light killeth and sometimes the darkness giveth life'*. The burden of past glories oppressed most thinkers in China, and probably even more in Hindu and Islamic cultures. The Latin-Christian tradition was sufficiently raw and new to be willing to go its own way. Brash enough to be confident in its own merits while doing things that no one had done before.

Along with its well-known defects, the things that Professor Dawkins rants about in the name of Reason, the Latin-Christian tradition had merits based on three key ideas:

- a) All knowledge should be available to anyone who could read.
- b) There is dignity in manual work.
- c) Theology allows for novelties.

China had the first of these – anyone who could afford it was allowed to learn scholarly culture and sit the exams for entry into the ruling civil service. But the prejudice against manual labour was extremely strong: in a future article I will quote how Mao describes his own freeing of himself from this ancient burden.

(Interestingly, I don't know of another Chinese thinker besides Mao who ever paid serious attention to the matter. I'd have thought it much the most obvious blockage to China's 20<sup>th</sup> century desire to get beyond its old framework, but it gets overlooked.)

What seems obvious to someone raised in Western Europe may be very nearly unthinkable to someone whose mind was formed by a different set of values.

China had most of what were considered the take-off conditions for Europe's Industrial Capitalism, but showed fantastic resistance to it. My view is that the missing elements were those that are mostly not mentioned:

- \* A scientific community favouring logic, proof and open debate.

- \* A disturbed and disturbing ideology undermining the confidence of intellectuals in the existing social order.
- \* The willingness of most of the educated to 'get their hands dirty'.
- \* The marginalisation of slavery in the home territories (even though it was flourishing and even expanding overseas).

Slavery was almost universal in era when European science developed. And most slaves came from the same cultural and ethnic group as the slave-owners, though Islam preferred to use 'unbelievers'. Judaism was exceptional in having seen slavery itself as doubtful, and also insisting that their own ancestors had been through a period of slavery in Egypt. This singular viewpoint was carried over into Christianity, in part as a reaction to the extreme development of slavery in the Greek and Roman world. But it did not prevent serfdom for most European peasants or cruel plantation-slavery in overseas territories.

Slavery fuelled by cash crops sold to by Europe was very demoralising for both owners and owned. The US South still shows the damage for it many generations after being compelled to abolish it. The US South is a violent, ill-educated and uncreative society compared to the other overseas English settlements, though it does produce some excellent soldiers. But almost any sort of society can produce soldiers: producing scientists and analytical thinkers is a rare trick.

The distancing of slavery from the core of the society in Europe and its offshoots was probably a helpful factor. Most of Western Europe had abolished serfdom and slavery in their homelands by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when science began to get going.

Europe offered a new version of human existence. But there were sound reasons for traditional China not to 'take a leap in the dark' and abandoned a proven system that had maintained a high level of civilisation for so long. Until Europe developed industrial capitalism, China's system was the world leader in the eyes of most foreign visitors. China's scholar-

gentry system was very efficient and very stable. It allowed for gradual technological improvement while keeping the cultural basics. The ruling scholar-gentry were recruited for cleverness and education: it was easier for the rich to get their children educated, but they also had to be able to learn. It was not a closed system: Chinese-Belgian writer Han Suyin tells of how a whole village might club together to support one clever child who had a chance of passing the official exams. (The sort of respect for learning that also helps explains the great success of Chinese immigrants in the Western world.)

The system run by the scholar-gentry was an administrative machine based on merit rather than ancestry, what's sometimes called a bureaucratic system. I'd sooner keep the term 'bureaucratic' for abuses of such a system and describe it just as a machine composed of very clever men (no women, unfortunately). Rants about 'bureaucracy' are part of the standard beliefs of Britain's former ruling class: but this class failed and was discarded during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is the main reason why they find so many things to complain about.

All round the world, experience shows that some sort of administrative machine is necessary for modern life. And the richer or more civilised the society, the bigger and more expensive the administrative machinery needs to be. Those who feel burdened fail to consider that the income they have after paying all their taxes is much bigger than their ancestors got in the days when the state was smaller and cheaper and taxes lighter.

China's traditional system of government was small for the number of people it ruled. The central authority chose officials at provincial and county level: the administrative machine stopped there and encouraged people to be self-governing as far as was possible.

Some sort of state is necessary for any kind of life above tribalism. The oldest known systems are aristocratic – people are born to power. There was usually also a system of scribes where talent must

have counted for something, but their role was secondary. China improved on this by creating a ruling administrative machine or bureaucracy. Within it, individuals had power on the basis of their positions, not birth or wealth or skills giving anyone an automatic right.

### **Good Walls, Bad Neighbours**

China's famous Great Wall is widely seen as the symbol of China's resistance to outside ideas. This overlooks several important truths, including that the wall only covers China's northern frontiers. Besides, lots of useful new ideas did reach China via the lands beyond the Great Wall, including Buddhism in a version that is now fully included in the culture.

There were also several successive Great Walls, not one unchanging wall. And those walls were there to intimidate and inconvenience invading nomads. A comparison between China and either India or Persia is illustrative: those civilisations had no Great Wall between them and the steppe nomads. They suffered continuous small invasions which stopped them ever getting as rich and strong as pre-industrial China.

The Chinese Wall was effective, but it was never expected to be a total barrier. Normal procedures for soldiers on the wall assumed that some nomads would always get through:

It was decided in the Tang dynasty (618-907) that, if the number of invaders [crossing the Great Wall] ranged between 50 and 500, 1 torch should be lit; 2 torches if they numbered less than 3,000; 3 torches if they were on horseback, and the number ranged between 500 and 1,000; and 4 torches if they were between 1,000 and 10,000 but the exact number was not known.<sup>24</sup>

The very concept of a single unified 'Great Wall' is a misleading one, a creation of European travellers and later, Chinese nationalism. In reality, the Wall is a collection of separate fortifications, collectively best labelled 'the Long Walls,' built by different dynasties for different purposes.

Like most fortified positions, its intentions were as much aggressive as defensive. Until relatively recently, Chinese foreign policy was orientated mostly towards the north, where a vigorous series of invaders and empires rose to challenge, and sometimes conquer, the Chinese state in its various incarnations.

The Long Walls as often served as jumping-off points for Chinese military expeditions as they did as defensive positions against nomadic raiders. On top of that, the Walls were often built around lands very recently settled by Han colonists; like colonial fortresses in the Americas, their purpose was to keep out the people whose lands had just been nicked.

Much of the time, though, the Walls' most frequent function was to serve as a customs barrier. Northern trade was huge business, from tea to furs to horses. Hadrian's Wall served a similar purpose in Britain, as did the 'Great Hedge of India,' a two-thousand-mile-long mass of trees, brambles, and thorns planted by the British right across the country to enforce the notorious Salt Tax.<sup>25</sup>

China always had its own 'wild west', thinly populated lands where farmers must have been fighting nomads for longer than even Chinese history records. It was much tougher than the American West: even the toughest Native American tribes would have been insignificant in armies of Genghis Kahn. The civilised heartland of the Central Plains around the Yellow River had no solid natural barrier against them:

That part of Asia which is suitable for nomads... runs like a huge corridor from east to west for four thousand miles or so. Its northern wall is the Siberian forest mass; the southern is provided by deserts, great mountain ranges, and the plateaux of Tibet and Iran. For the most part it is grassy steppe, though the boundary with the desert fluctuates and it extends into it to important oases... No one knows the ultimate origins of the peoples of central Asia... until modern times they remained illiterate and they lived in a mental world of demons and magic except when converted to the higher religions. They were skilled horsemen and especially adept in the use of the composite bow, the weapon of the

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<sup>24</sup> Luo Zhewen and Zhao Luo, *Great Wall Of China In History and Legend*, , pages 6-7

<sup>25</sup>

[<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90782/90873/6905686.html>]

mounted archer, which took extra power from its construction not from a single piece of wood but from strips of wood and horn.<sup>26</sup>

Sophisticated agricultural peoples would always absorb these tough nomads, when the two overlapped. Sometimes they formed hybrid cultures clever enough to beat raw barbarians and tough enough to conquer their more civilised neighbours. As part of the process, the various Chinese dynasties built different versions of the Great Wall:

Extensive as the Ten Thousand Li Great Wall of Qin Shi Huang was, the Great Wall of the Han Dynasty was even larger, for walls were built outside the original ones... the Han Dynasty's wall was the longest in the history of China. The Great Wall of Han was primarily built to guard against the Xiongnu... the Xiongnu fled to far-off places.<sup>27</sup>

It was Joseph de Guignes in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century who first linked these Xiongnu [Hsien-Nu] with the Huns who later invaded Europe. The idea was taken up in Gibbon's *Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire*, but Gibbon oversimplified. China had been overrun by other barbarians a century and a half before the Huns hit Europe. Still, the wall must have kept out a lot of small bands of raiders. You could *climb* the Great Wall, wherever it was not strongly defended. But getting a horse over it would be a different matter, and a steppe-nomad without his horse would be much less formidable. Raiders could and did steal horses, but variation in the quality and usefulness of horses is said to be as drastic as that in motor vehicles. Maybe more: a bad horse can't be trained and a good horse will need time to adapt to a new owner. The Great Wall made raiding much harder and would also have stopped smugglers for ordinary bulky goods.

Well-organised nomads could break through the wall, but only after they formed their own administrative machine, mostly military. The Mongols were the champions at this, and they were not the wild horde of

popular legend. Mongols lived lives of amazing toughness in primitive conditions, but were also more disciplined and organised than most of their foes:

The European horseman was far less mobile than his Mongol counterpart. He could not manage delicate or intricate manoeuvres; the day was usually decided on the basis of a rather basic head-on clash. Once the charge had taken place, most knights dismounted.. and combat continued with blade and shield in ferocious hand-to-hand combat... The knights themselves were not trained officers, and their individual combat skills were of no use when leading men into battle. The size of their retinue was an indication of their wealth, not their ability, and there was no clear chain of command down from the commander-in-chief...

By contrast the Mongols were a tightly disciplined fighting machine, in which each soldier knew his place and his responsibilities. He did not fight as an individual, but as part of a massive formation that was led in and out of well-drilled manoeuvres. When the Mongol army advanced they approached as a series of long single ranks, made up of a number of units. The first two consisted of heavy cavalry, followed by three ranks of light cavalry. Out on either flank and up front were further, smaller detachments of light cavalry...

The Mongols also preferred to manoeuvre the enemy's ranks to exactly where they wanted them... The sight of the Mongols in flight was a temptation that most enemy commanders could not resist... By the time the enemy had reached the killing ground, their ranks were already spread out and made easy targets.<sup>28</sup>

The Mongols who conquered North China showed no interest in copying its civilised values. I think that they were the first and last nomads to rule a big chunk of China's Central Plains without seeking to become a new dynasty. Even for Mongols it did not last, with Kublai Khan adapting to Chinese values. When the heirs of Kublai Khan were driven out, a native dynasty called the Ming took over, and initially controlled the nomads, even deterring Timur ('Tamurlane') till the very end of his

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<sup>26</sup> Roberts, J. M.; *The Penguin History Of The World*; Penguin Books, page 311

<sup>27</sup> Luo Zhewen and Zhao Luo, *Great Wall Of China In History and Legend*, , pages 6-7

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<sup>28</sup> Marshall, Robert. *Storm From the East: From Genghis Khan to Khubilai Khan*, pages 92-93

long life. For a time the Ming managed without a Great Wall, but a bad military defeat in which their Emperor was captured during a military expedition against the nomads made a more defensive strategy necessary.

The Ming Great Wall is the one the world knows about, but it was probably much more sophisticated than earlier walls, which were usually rammed-earth reinforced with wood. And an important point to note about the Ming Great Wall is that it has defences *on both sides*: it is not like a city wall, where the 'inside' is assumed to be safe.

The Ming Great Wall is also wide enough for a marching army, which must have greatly increased the cost of construction. It could be viewed as an enormous fortified road, a way of moving large numbers of troops with minimal danger of ambush. Most of the land near the Great Wall is very rugged and would be very dangerous to march through using an ordinary road.

Even the Ming Great Wall is reduced to a simple wall of reinforced rammed-earth at its western end. A fortress at a place called Jiayuguan was created to control that part of the frontier, and it was strengthened when there was the looming danger of an invasion by Timur.<sup>29</sup> Jiayuguan Fort is a formidable place, but the walls on either side of it are quite simple.<sup>30</sup> Yet even these simple walls were not unsophisticated: the local museum shows tricks like a sandy area left in front of the wall that would preserve the tracks of any would-be intruder.

Yet intruders managed to intrude regardless. The Manchu were another line of nomadic rulers, but one which claimed to be a Chinese dynasty even while they were a small kingdom north of the Great Wall. Whether they could have broken through the wall remains unknown: they were let in by a Chinese general serving the Ming, who made a deal after Chinese

rebels took Beijing and drove the last Ming Emperor to suicide. The Manchu Dynasty established firm rule over all of the 'Fringelands', but had a rigid approach to culture, favouring hierarchy and keeping a massive social gap between ordinary Chinese and the Manchu rulers.

### **The Taiping Alternative**

The most fascinating thing about China is that events there often parallel events in Europe, but then end up very differently. Sung Dynasty China had its own renaissance well before that in Italy, but it ended with their conquest by the Mongols. China under the Ming had a vast sea-expansion a few decades before the Spanish and Portuguese grabbed control of all the world's oceans, but they found it unprofitable. Later the Taiping rebels partly mirrored the 1848 revolutions in Europe, something that Marx noticed. Marx unfortunately failed to see the full picture, being hampered a fixed notion that China was several historic eras behind Europe:

Whatever be the social causes, and whatever religious, dynastic, or national shape they may assume, that have brought about the chronic rebellions subsisting in China for about ten years past, and now gathered together in one formidable revolution the occasion of this outbreak has unquestionably been afforded by the English cannon forcing upon China that soporific drug called opium. Before the British arms the authority of the Manchu dynasty fell to pieces; the superstitious faith in the eternity of the Celestial Empire broke down; the barbarous and hermetic isolation from the civilized world was infringed.

Just as the Emperor was wont to be considered the father of all China, so his officers were looked upon as sustaining the paternal relation to their respective districts. But this patriarchal authority, the only moral link embracing the vast machinery of the State, has gradually been corroded by the corruption of those officers, who have made great gains by conniving at opium smuggling. This has occurred principally in the same Southern provinces where the rebellion commenced. It is almost needless to observe that, in the same measure in which

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<sup>29</sup> Wikipedia article on Jiayuguan (pass)

<sup>30</sup> I took some photos there as a tourist in 2008, see [http://www.flickr.com/photos/45909111@N00/sets/72157608120881873/]

opium has obtained the sovereignty over the Chinese, the Emperor and his staff of pedantic mandarins have become dispossessed of their own sovereignty. It would seem as though history had first to make this whole people drunk before it could rouse them out of their hereditary stupidity.

Though scarcely existing in former times, the import of English cottons, and to a small extent of English woollens, has rapidly risen since 1833, the epoch when the monopoly of trade with China was transferred from the East India Company to Private commerce, and on a much greater scale since 1840, the epoch when other nations, and especially our own, also obtained a share in the Chinese trade. This introduction of foreign manufactures has had a similar effect on the native industry to that which it formerly had on Asia Minor, Persia and India. In China the spinners and weavers have suffered greatly under this foreign competition, and the community has become unsettled in proportion. (*Revolution in China and In Europe*, New York Daily Tribune, June 14, 1853<sup>31</sup>)

In 1853, the Taiping had the only Communists armies in the entire world, but Marx ignored this aspect. He did have insights, seeing the whole Chinese Empire as being bound by patriarchal ties. He was also correct in anticipating that the 'clean' trade in foreign manufactures would be as destructive as the 'dirty' trade in opium. But while Adam Smith had viewed China as on a level with Europe, Marx accepted the common 19<sup>th</sup> century notion that progress had only happened in Europe. Engels shows just the same mix, saying in 1857 during the early stages of the Second Opium War:

The English have just concluded an Asiatic war, and are entering upon another. The resistance offered by the Persians, and that which the Chinese have so far opposed to British invasion, form a contrast worth our attention. In Persia, the European system of military organization has been engrafted upon Asiatic barbarity; in China, the rotting semicivilization of the oldest State in the world meets the Europeans with its own resources. Persia has been signally defeated, while distracted, half-dissolved China has hit upon a system of

resistance which, if followed up, will render impossible a repetition of the triumphal marches of the first Anglo-Chinese war...

In short, instead of moralizing on the horrible atrocities of the Chinese, as the chivalrous English press does, we had better recognize that this is a war *pro aris et focis*,<sup>32</sup> a popular war for the maintenance of Chinese nationality, with all its overbearing prejudice, stupidity, learned ignorance and pedantic barbarism if you like, but yet a popular war. And in a popular war the means used by the insurgent nation cannot be measured by the commonly recognized rules of regular warfare, nor by any other abstract standard, but by the degree of civilization only attained by that insurgent nation...

One thing is certain, that the death-hour of Old China is rapidly drawing nigh. Civil war has already divided the South from the North of the Empire, and the Rebel King seems to be as secure from the Imperialists (if not from the intrigues of his own followers) at Nanking [Nanjing], as the Heavenly Emperor from the rebels at Peking [Beijing]. Canton [Guangzhou] carries on, so far, a sort of independent war with the English, and all foreigners in general; and while British and French fleets and troops flock to Hong Kong. (*Persia — China*, New York Daily Tribune, May 22, 1857<sup>33</sup>)

Engels noticed the existence of the Taiping Rebel King or Heavenly Emperor, but saw nothing interesting in what was a very radical movement for its day. In 1850 he had written *The Peasant War in Germany*, including an account of the career of Thomas Muntzer, whom he saw as a pioneer of socialism, albeit expressed in religious terms. Almost the same thing was happening in China in his own lifetime, but he failed to make the link. The Taiping collectivised the land and proclaimed equality of the sexes, but Engels ignored that. His remarks about copying the West or using native methods half-foresee what would later happen, yet is wrong on immediate events, as was the case with almost all his attempts to read an ongoing war. (Engels didn't expect Prussia's dramatic victory in the Austro-

<sup>31</sup> [<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/06/14.htm>]

<sup>32</sup> "For our altars and our hearths", meaning much the same as the modern "For God and country"

<sup>33</sup> [<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/06/05.htm>]

Prussian War, and was fully expecting the Confederacy to win the US Civil War, contrary to Marx who always expected the Union's economic strength to prove decisive.)

The pieces of the jigsaw were there in Marx and Engels, but no one before Mao put them together. I've no idea whether he read these particular Marxist classics before developing his own ideas: in fact I've never seen the questions asked or the connections made. However it was, the patterns did recur and Mao understood the process well enough to steer it to victory.

Of course Traditional China had been weakened by the successful crushing of the Taiping movement in the 1850s and early 1860s. It started as an eccentric Christian sect created by a young man who'd failed the Imperial Examinations, and who decided after an apparent mental breakdown that he was the younger brother of Christ – a neat way of fitting Christianity into the Chinese world outlook. I've not seen anyone compare it to Islam, but for a long time I've been struck by the similarities; a fringe movement forced to fight within the lifetime of its founder and proving unexpectedly strong. The difference, of course, is that Islam triumphed. Muslims would undoubtedly view the Taiping founder as a False Prophet. But if you suppose that Muhammad and the Taiping founder Hong Xiuquan were equally brave, sincere, gifted and mistaken, then it seems just a matter of military accidents that one of them founded both a state and a world-religion while the other didn't.

I don't know of anyone nowadays who view the Taiping as authentic, though the Chinese Communists see the movement as a revolutionary precursor, sadly burdened with superstitious ideas. Some Taiping remnants did get absorbed into the Chinese Communist's new armies.

In their own time, the Taiping failed and were crushed. Defeated due to a mix of Western hostility and highly intelligent organisation against them by the Han gentry, most notably a man called Zeng Guofan. But this turned out to be just a

postponement of the end. The work of Zeng Guofan in forming regional armies has been seen as laying the basis for the later disintegration into warlordism. You might see it as a four-stage process:

- a) Traditionalist Imperial Warlordism, independent armies formed by the Han gentry to fight the Taiping
- b) Modernising Imperial Warlordism, much the same people with modern weapons and some elements of European military organisation.
- c) Early Republican Warlordism, the same armies no longer loyal to the dynasty, but not under central control either. Some of these lasted till the 1940s and went over the Communists when it became clear they were the winners.
- d) Kuomintang Warlordism, partly reformed but very incompletely. Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi<sup>34</sup>) was just the largest of these, and his power was based mostly on the loyalty of officers he had trained during the years of Soviet-Kuomintang cooperation.

That was the historic progression, but I can't see it had to be like that. Zeng and the other Imperial Warlords remind me of the mix of traditional authoritarianism and technological progressiveness that triumphed in the Meiji Restoration in Japan. Zeng died in 1872, always loyal to the dynasty, but the dynasty was less and less worthy of anyone's loyalty. The Dowager Emperess Cixi preferred to keep government weak and traditionalist, so that she would be allowed to dominate it in a culture where female political authority was a great anomaly.

### **Three Cuckoos: a Failed Modernisation**

China up to the Opium War was widely admired as a place well-adapted to civilised life. Up to then, if someone had to be born as a man without any assurance

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<sup>34</sup> Jiang Jieshi is the proper transcription of the man's name in the current Chinese system. But 'Chiang Kai-shek' is the name known to people in the West, and the form used for two recent biographies of the man, so I will use it throughout.



of social position or good luck, China would have been the best place to choose. Being born as a woman would have been another matter: not very free or safe anywhere, but I'm sure that there were better places than Imperial China. But most Chinese men and women were fairly content. The hybrid of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism that had developed in China was psychologically satisfying. (Which doesn't mean it was wise in a wider sense; just that the creeds and the religious professionals had become familiar with human weaknesses.)

None of the Chinese philosophies had the least inkling of the physical structure of the universe, of course. But anything that could fit the existing pattern was accepted. The Jesuits in China were OK for as long as they concealed the alien and intolerant nature of their actual beliefs. As I mentioned earlier, the Jesuits wanted to bend Catholic doctrine on the matter of Ancestor-Worship and showed every sign of blending into Chinese culture, which was much more sophisticated than anything Europe had at the time.

As I said earlier, China under the Manchu dynasty was not static: it accepted many new crops that Europeans brought back from the New World, and maybe pushed intensive agriculture too far. The best estimates are that there were 59 million Chinese in the year 100, 160 million in 1600 and over 300 million in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup>

Adam Smith, writing in the 1770s, was entirely accurate when he said that China was richer than any part of Europe. In 1820 China still had about a quarter of the world's population and a third of the world's wealth.<sup>36</sup> Europe did better in terms of GDP per head: maybe twice as high in Western Europe as in China, too small a gap to be attractive. But as Adam Smith also noted, Europe had accepted the idea of continuous change.

The most important difference was military, not economic. The kingdoms of Western Europe (along with a few republics) had been fighting each other for centuries, by land and by sea. Gunpowder as such was not decisive, and China had anyway invented it and never stopped using it for warfare. What mattered was a mix of metallurgy, training and organisation that Europe evolved. Britain's

Industrial Revolution was in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century beginning to produce completely novel weapon systems.

In the First Opium War (1839-1842), the British fleet included a vessel called the *Nemesis*, built in Britain for the East India Company. One of the world's first iron ships, it was powered by steam and was able to go places where a conventional warship could not. It was able to chase the Chinese fleet up the river and sink most of it, causing it to be viewed as a 'devil ship' by the Chinese. I'd count this use of iron warships as a rather more significant episode than the famous clash between the *Monitor* and the *Virginia* (*Merrimac*) in the 1860. That battle was indecisive, and also happened at a time when Europe already had much more powerful iron warships, France's *La Gloire* and Britain's *HMS Warrior*. But when it comes to writing popular history, the case of the *Nemesis* had two disadvantages. It was not American, and it was not at all heroic. The duel of the *Monitor* and the *Virginia* was dramatic, and occurred between two rival causes that are mostly seen as noble and heroic (though I find nothing noble in a war to preserve race-based slavery). But both sides were brave and evenly matched, while the *Nemesis* sinking much weaker vessels looks much more like bullying, the 'upper muscle' of Imperialism applied without any moral concerns.<sup>37</sup>

The *Nemesis* was an early and rather crude war-machine, but it was way beyond anything China could produce. Nor was China well placed to try. By the 1840s, the Manchu Dynasty was long past its best, with most of its hereditary soldiers lacking warlike skills and not much inclined to fight. Europe meantime had developed its military technology through continuous small wars. Europe had several huge military-industrial complexes that were rivals to each other, and which pioneered concepts like standardisation that were later taken up by non-military industries. The First Opium War exposed a dangerous gap in military effectiveness: European powers could project their power across eight time-zones: send their military one-third of the way round the world and still be much stronger than the vast Chinese Empire.

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<sup>35</sup> Maddison, Angus. *The World Economy: Historical Statistics*, OECD 2003, table 8a, page 256. This is the standard work on the subject.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, table 8b, page 261

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<sup>37</sup> The phrase 'upper muscle community' occurred accidentally in BBC subtitles about the 'international community' ganging up on Syria. I recorded it at [<http://www.flickr.com/photos/45909111@N00/6315083247/in/p/hotostream>]. It seems a fitting term for the revived imperialism of the West after the end of the Cold War: it is as much about 'muscle' or superior strength as any criminal gang.

First China and then Japan saw that they would have to change drastically if they were to survive. In Japan, the drastic changes included the overthrow in 1868 of the Tokugawa Shogun in the name of the Japanese Emperor, who had not actually ruled since 1603. The Shoguns had made some steps towards modernisation, but it was their own well-tuned and stable system that they were being asked to dismantle. Whether they could have managed their own modernisation remains unknown, but my own strong feeling is that they could not.

The Meiji Restoration was a successful rebellion against the Shogun, who then stepped down to become an ordinary nobleman. The teenage Emperor became a suitable figurehead for a group of politicians who had decided to break with the past. This repudiation was expressed in something called the 'Charter Oath':

By this oath, we set up as our aim the establishment of the national weal on a broad basis and the framing of a constitution and laws.

Deliberative assemblies shall be widely established and all matters decided by open discussion.

All classes, high and mighty, shall be united in vigorously carrying out the administration of affairs of state.

The common people, no less than the civil and military officials, shall all be allowed to pursue their own calling so that there may be no discontent.

Evil customs of the past shall be broken off and everything based upon the just laws of Nature.

Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundation of imperial rule.<sup>38</sup>

You can't be timid if you're intending to change the cultural and social life of an old and sophisticated society. The 'Charter Oath' affirmed European political ideas as they existing in the 1860s, which was a drastic break with Japan's own traditions. Automatic inherited privileges of class were rejected, and no one was to be tied to their father's profession. Inequality and class distinctiveness were assumed to be natural, just as they were in Europe at the time, except by a few communists and anarchist. But politic was to be opened up. Anyone could express opinions on how the country should be governed, so long as certain basics were

respected.

The defects of Imperial Japan were very much the same as the defects of the systems they copied, the aggressive European Empires of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Empires that later smashed themselves up in World War One and then the Great Depression. Meantime Imperial Japan wrecking itself during its invasion of China and then its attack on the USA in World War Two.

Whether China could have followed such a path is moot. When politics is fluid, the right individual in the right position can make a lot of difference. Or the wrong individual in that same position can be disastrous. China mostly had weak leadership, and those leaders who were strong were generally strong in the wrong way, good at grasping power but bad at doing anything useful with it.

I'd place a lot of blame on the three major leaders of China's period of weakness: the Dowager Empress Cixi, General Yuan Shikai and Chiang Kai-shek. Cuckoos, people who were brilliant and gaining and holding onto power, but unable to do anything useful with it. In general terms they wanted to modernise China, but all of them expected the bulk of the population to stay passive.

You can't have a dynamic society built on top of a passive and superstitious population with few concerns beyond its own village or town life. Mao gets bitched about by most Western commentators and many Chinese dissidents, because of the simplistic and sometimes destructive methods he used to create dynamism right through the society. Much worse things and greater intolerance in imposing ideas had happened in Europe's own modernisation, which also had decades and centuries to work in. The same dynamism was imposed on European colonies, where the people suddenly found themselves ruled at a local level by "District Officers" of mysterious origins and with alarming powers. Japan did the same job for Korea and Taiwan when it ruled them. But only Japan managed to modernise without uprooting its own traditions.

Why did Traditionalist China fail? Several reasons. The Manchu dynasty had become weak, certainly. But the Dowager Empress Cixi certainly exerted a malign influence, combining a talent for court intrigue with a basic unwillingness to accept that the world she'd grown up in was now doomed. Manchu inherited privilege was also a major problem, and was the thing that Cixi and her successors preserved to the bitter end. The dynasty

<sup>38</sup> [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five\\_Charter\\_Oath](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_Charter_Oath)]

undermined their traditionalist credentials first, abolishing the Imperials Examinations that had kept China tied to Confucian principles across the centuries. But the government was still dominated by a tiny circle of privileged Manchu. This must have lost them whatever Han-gentry support they still had, without conceding enough to satisfy radicals.

A Japanese-style reform would have needed a strong and determined Emperor, or at least a respectable figurehead. And it would have needed a decisive victory over the older system of government, which is just what didn't happen. There was a 'Self-Strengthening Movement' from 1865 to 1895, but it amounted to little. Change had to take place within a corrupt old system of government, whereas the earlier Meiji Restoration had overthrown the Shogun's rule. What happened in Japan was a fresh start, with the added advantage of clear historic legitimacy flowing from the Emperor.

The Guangxu Emperor, Cixi's nephew, made his much more serious attempt in 1898, but was betrayed and was kept prisoner for ten years. Some people criticise the Guangxu Emperor for attempting a very drastic reforms during the 'Hundred Days' in 1898. But China had started late. Limited reforms that the conservatives could live with had been tried and had produced poor results. The failure of these half-measures were shown by China's decisive defeat by Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894-5.

By 1898, Japan had a 30 years lead, but China was much bigger and might have become strong enough to rule out the possibility of further Japanese aggression. Sadly, the young emperor trusted General Yuan Shikai, who turned out to be a shallow schemer. He betrayed the reforming Emperor and drastic change was fatally delayed.

When Cixi died in 1908, the Reform Emperor was still in his late 30s. He could have become a formidable ruler, but he died a day before Cixi. Officially he died of natural causes after a long illness: some historians believe this, which suggests to me that they aren't very good historians. The timing would be an absurd coincidence if it was not murder by people who could expect loss of power and probable punishment had he been the next ruler..

In 2008, Chinese historians and scientists published evidence that he'd been poisoned

with arsenic.<sup>39</sup> *Who* did it remains uncertain, and maybe does not matter much. Dowager Emperess Cixi was a malign influence, but others went along with her rule and preferred her to the likely alternatives.

The death of the Reform Emperor doomed the dynasty. No alternative ruler was likely to be taken seriously – and in any case the court chose a two-year-old called Puyi. He was the figurehead for an extremely weak government that promised a constitution but hung on like grim death to the superiority of Manchus over Han. The new government ousted Yuan Shikai, who was a Han but also a lifelong servant of the dynasty, the sort of person they absolutely had to keep loyal. The Han gentry remembered the Taiping Rebellion: they were afraid of the peasantry. It wouldn't be true to say that they were afraid of their fellow-citizens: there was no such thing as a fellowship among Chinese of different classes, nor did China then have the concept of citizenship in the Western sense. There was a massive population that was barely political and a gentry that wanted a modest development within traditional forms. But the dynasty moved much too slowly, waiting till 1908 before offering a joke constitution that would not have come into effect until 1917 and did not offer a proper constitutional monarchy. Within three years there was a major revolt that threatened civil war. The 1911 Revolution was followed by a 1912 compromise that officially deposed the Emperor. This wiped out the existing framework of loyalty, but put nothing very solid in its place.

Cixi was the first cuckoo. The fate of the other two will be told in the next article.

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## **Appendix: The Indus Valley Civilisation and its Continuity**

The Indus Valley or Harappan Civilization dates back to 3300 BC, quite a bit older than similar developments in what is now China. But how much continuity was there between this and Hindu civilisation? The political system and history of the Harappan is unknown, but the lack of buildings that might be palaces or major temples has been noted. This suggests something very different from the later Hindu system of powerful kings and important temples.

There was an 'Indus script' of several hundred signs, of unknown meaning. It's not been proven to be a writing system, taking 'writing system' to mean a script capable of expressing anything that can be said. It might have been just a set of symbols with specific meaning, just as we today have road signs and also symbols on clothing to explain how it can be washed. Most Harappan inscriptions are very short.

It has been suggested that it generated later Hindu scripts, after a mysterious break of many centuries with no signs of writing. The original inscriptions would make no sense as messages, but might be personal names. But the mainstream Western view is that Hindu culture borrowed a version of the alphabet from the ancient peoples of West Asia, the same system that also spread west to become the Greek and Latin alphabets.

When the Indus Valley civilisation was discovered, it was already known that there was a single Indo-European family of languages, a notion that began when people noticed the uncanny similarities of Sanskrit to Latin and Greek. The general assumption was that this language family had begun somewhere in Eastern Europe – treating the lands west of Vienna and up to the Baltic coast and the eastern flanks of the Carpathians as 'Middle Europe' and everything east of that and up to the Urals as the real Eastern Europe. Within this vast area, the Ukraine was a favoured location – though it may have begun just south of Europe as we now define it, in Anatolia. You certainly find the greatest number of branches of Indo-European in this Eastern Europe / Western Asia region: Greek, Albanian, the Balto-Slavic languages and the extinct Anatolian languages that included Hittite. It was assumed that the Germanic, Italian and Celtic branches had gone west while the Slavonic and Indo-Iranian branches had gone east. This spread was in part based on the military usefulness of the chariot, which was unknown to the Indus Valley people

Modern linguists define ten to twelve branches of Indo-European, some extinct. Indo-Iranian is just one, and not the only one to go east. Tocharian is another complete branch known from the Tarim Basin in Central Asia, now part of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of China, and it has more in common with some West European branches than it has with Indo-Iranian. Albanian, Greek and Armenian are each isolated survivals of what are believed to be other major branches, existing close to where the original Indo-European was probably spoken.

The original British discoverers of the Indus Valley rapidly arrived at a picture of what they'd found: a very old culture destroyed by barbaric Indo-European invaders, who very much later created their own civilisation. Evidence to support this was found in the *Rig-Veda*, the oldest surviving Hindu writing, including the god Indra bearing a title that is sometimes translated as 'Breaker of Cities'. (The correctness of this translation has been disputed.)

Later studies redrew this picture. For one thing, the Indus Valley civilisation was not destroyed by invaders: it simply collapsed. It is plausible that the arriving Indo-Iranians merged with some small-scale remnants of this culture. But some Hindu nationalists wish to go further and claim that the Indus Valley people were speakers of an Indo-Iranian language. This is doubtful: other major languages of India belong to unrelated language families, whereas the Indian sub-continent contained no other branches of Indo-European until English became widespread.

The best estimate is that the Indo-Iranian warrior tribes arrived after the Indus Valley civilisation had collapsed. Some elements of the culture were absorbed, and there is evidence that gods and goddesses survived obscurely and later surfaced to become part of the modified Hinduism that developed in the face of the challenge from the Buddhist and Jain creeds. It's all disputed, but probably nothing like China's continuity.

The speakers of Dravidian languages in South India would like to think that the people of the Indus Valley civilisation also spoke a Dravidian language. This is plausible but speculative.

Most of the territory of the Indus Valley civilisation is in Pakistan, which has the river Indus as its core. Whatever elements of the Indus Valley religion may have survived in Hinduism have been replaced by Islam.

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