

Mellon-Sawyer Seminar 2007/8

“The first great divergence: China and Europe, 500-800 CE”

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Six hundred years ago China was the most powerful state on earth. The eunuch admiral Zheng He spent 1406 cruising around the Indian Ocean at the head of 30,000 crew in a fleet of giant Chinese “treasure ships,” trading, collecting tribute, and setting up and deposing client kings at will. By 1433, Chinese ships were visiting Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya, and probably Australia too. By any reasonable estimate, China seemed set to become the world’s first global power. But that did not happen. Anti-trade Confucian factions won out in struggles at the Ming court, and long-distance voyages were banned. By 1467, most records of Zheng’s voyages were lost or destroyed.

Half a millennium later, far from dominating as the world, China seemed – at least to western observers – to be going backward. When a dispute over opium trading escalated uncontrollably in 1839, the British sent a small naval force to claim damages from the governor of Canton. A single ironclad gunboat blasted its way through all the Chinese defenses, and in 1842, with the Grand Canal under British control, Nanjing facing plunder, and famine closing in on Beijing, China conceded British demands for open ports and the right to send missionaries deep into the country. This defeat triggered crises that brought China to the verge of partition. One Hong Xiuquan, a failed civil service candidate who developed his own bizarre version of Christianity out of the teachings of the missionaries at Canton, led the massive Taiping Rebellion to install a Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. Tens of millions died in the struggle to suppress it. Meanwhile, British and French troops had burned the Summer Palace at Beijing and Commander Perry had forced the Japanese to open their ports to Western ships. By the time the Boxer Rebellion collapsed in 1900 Western dominance seemed set in stone.

Yet once again the obvious prediction seems to have been wrong. A century after China’s last imperial dynasty was overthrown, the country’s economy is doubling in size every seven years, Shanghai has more skyscrapers than any other city on earth, and a Chinese taikonaut has orbited the planet. A reevaluation of economic data in December 2005 showed that China now has the world’s fourth-biggest economy. Many scholars predict that with her “billion new capitalists,” China will be the world’s greatest power by the end of this century.

Hardly a month goes by without some major periodical running a cover story on the Chinese boom, or a new trade book appearing to describe the challenges (or opportunities) this poses (e.g., Fishman 2005; Gittings 2005; Prestowitz 2005). This level of public interest is a recent phenomenon, but scholars have been asking for more than a hundred years why the Chinese and European trajectories diverged. The founding fathers of social science – Malthus, Marx, and Weber – all wrote on the topic. In the late nineteenth century and through much of the twentieth the issue seemed to be one of explaining a “great divergence”; why Europe had pulled decisively ahead of China.

The most popular answer in this literature was that statism and centralization explained China’s inability to match Europe’s success. Fifteenth-century China was unified into a single state, which meant that emperors like Yongle (1402-1424) who looked outward had the resources to mount spectacular voyages. But by the same token emperors who feared the commercial energies such activities unleashed had the resources to suppress them completely. Fifteenth-century Europe, by contrast, was highly fragmented, with intense competition both within and between numerous states. Portugal’s Prince Henry “the Navigator” (1394-1460) supported long-

distance trade to generate wealth to fund his struggles with rival kings; and despite being turned away by monarch after monarch, Christopher Columbus was able to keep pitching his idea to sail West to India until he finally found a taker. Many social scientists concluded that the contrast between China's imperial homogeneity and Europe's fragmentation explained why Europe, not China, emerged as the center of a global economy after 1500, and why Europe's industrial revolution took off, while China's Song dynasty industrialization proved abortive (particularly Wallerstein 1974: 52-63; Jones 1987).

Some social scientists went a step further and sought long-term structural explanations for the united China/fragmented Europe contrast. Jared Diamond (1997: 409-417), for instance, suggested that Europe's geography, with many peninsulas and inlets, militated against unity, while China's shape favored it; and David Landes (1998) suggested that Europe's climate and disease pool were simply more favorable for competitive, dynamic social systems. Ross Terrill (2003), by contrast, identified long-term cultural forces as determining China's path, arguing that the Chinese imperial system was so firmly rooted by the Middle Ages that even the 1949 Revolution could not shake it, and that China today remains an empire.

China's economic awakening since Mao's death has stimulated some social scientists to define the question rather differently. These scholars – often known as the “California School” – argue that the nineteenth- to twentieth-century assumption that the goal was to explain a “great divergence” was mistaken. China's imperial unity, they suggest, always made her the world's economic center of gravity, and the fragmented West's dominance since 1800 was largely the product of accidental factors. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China, they insist, was industrializing as rapidly as Northwest Europe, and had it not been for a few lucky breaks in Europe and the violent British attack in the 1840-42 Opium War, China would have had her own industrial revolution. They conclude that there was no “great divergence,” just a temporary interruption of the millennia-old pattern of Chinese dominance; and that the interruption is now coming to an end (e.g., Wong 1997; Frank 1998; Goldstone 1998; 2002; Pomeranz 2000; Hobson 2004).

This lack of consensus suggests that a new approach is needed. In this proposal we suggest that explaining the great divergence requires comparative analysis over a longer time-scale. Nearly all the scholars who have written on the issue are specialists in very recent history. While they have made major contributions to comparative analysis, they often seem to us to project their understanding of the last 500 years back into earlier periods, and then claim to have identified long-term patterns (whether of innate European or Chinese superiority). We accept as a working hypothesis the premise of much of the recent literature that the united East/fragmented West opposition must be a major explanatory variable, but – unlike the great majority of recent scholarship – we begin from the fact that this is itself a product of history.

Two thousand years ago large empires – Rome and the Han – dominated both Western and Eastern Eurasia. We are hardly the first historians to notice that the similarities between the Roman and Han states outweighed the differences (particularly Adshead 2000: 1-53; 2004: 20-29; Scheidel, ed. forthcoming). In each empire a monarch with claims to divinity ruled about 60 million subjects, unevenly distributed across more than 1.5 million square miles. Each emperor governed with the help of a highly literate elite, including historians, philosophers, and scientists. Both aristocracies lived in cities with hundreds of thousands of residents, and believed that they represented the pinnacle of civilization. In both Rome and China the state competed with the aristocracy to extract resources from the peasants, and spent most of its income on a standing army guarding frontier fortifications against nomadic raiders. Each state struggled to master vast distances with what now seems like simple technology. Each succeeded well enough that industry and trade flourished. Eastern and Western merchants met in India, Iran, and central Asia.

Nor are we the first historians to recognize that between 200 and 500 CE both empires dissolved in sometimes strikingly similar processes of state/aristocracy struggles, central Asian population movements, and epidemics (e.g., Elvin 1973: 35-53). The significance of our project,

we believe, lies in connecting these historical observations to contemporary social scientific debates about East and West. From the beginnings of agriculture through the origins of cities and states to the rise and fall of Roman and Han agrarian empires, Western and Eastern Eurasia followed parallel trajectories. But after about 200 CE they diverged. Nineteenth-century social scientists were mistaken in calling the widening gap they saw opening between Europe and China *the* great divergence; it was in fact a *second* great divergence. The first great divergence had come between 500 and 800 CE. In Eastern Eurasia, the Sui and Tang dynasties reunited China into a single empire, while in Western Eurasia the Byzantine emperor Justinian in the sixth century, the Arab Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates in the seventh and eighth, and Charlemagne the Frank in the late eighth and early ninth tried to do the same thing, but failed.

The united East/divided West opposition was not the timeless product of geography, climate, disease pools, or culture. It emerged between 500 and 800 CE, and made medieval China incomparably the richest and most powerful region of the world. We cannot hope to understand the role of imperial unity in either the second great divergence or the twenty-first century re-convergence until we have explained the *first* great divergence in late antiquity.

Historians have produced enormous and highly sophisticated literatures on both the Sui-Tang restoration and the Byzantine, Arab, and Frankish episodes in the West (e.g., Adshead 2004; Barfield 1989; Dien, ed., 1990; 2007; Ebrey 1978; 1993; Elvin 1973; Graff 2002; Pearce et al. 2001; Twitchett, ed., 1979; Wright, ed., 1973; 1978; Xiong 2006, on China; Airlie 1993; Becher 2003; Brown 2002; Donner 1981; Haldon 1997; 1999; 2004; Heather 2005; Hodges and Whitehouse 1983; Hourani 1991; Kaegi 1992; MacCormick 2001; Whitby 2002; Whittow 1996; Wickham 2005 on the West). However, there has been hardly any sustained comparative analysis of the first great divergence, perhaps because specialists are divided across so many university departments. Our goal in this seminar is to bring together specialists in both parts of the world to compare directly the events, structures, and parameters that led to different outcomes in East and West.

Our seminar has three parts. First, we will invite four leading regional experts – two focusing on Eastern Eurasia and two on Western – to Stanford during the 2007/08 academic year. We will ask the two experts on Eastern Eurasia to present their interpretations of why the Sui and Tang were able to reunite China, and to share any thoughts they have on comparisons with Western Eurasia; and will ask the two experts on Western Eurasia why the Byzantines, Arabs, and Franks failed to unite the region, and again for their thoughts on comparisons with China. Second, a group of interested Stanford faculty and students will meet once or twice after each of these visits to discuss what we heard. During the year, we hope that these sessions will build on each other, leading to a more coherent understanding of the issues. The grant will support two advanced graduate students (one in Chinese history, one in European) who are particularly interested in cross-cultural comparisons, and a postdoctoral fellow. These three junior scholars will facilitate the internal Stanford meetings. We hope to appoint a postdoctoral fellow who is a specialist in early medieval China with a strong leaning toward comparative analysis. Third, we hope to organize a conference bringing together the seminar organizers and leading scholars of the second great divergence such as Jack Goldstone, Bin Wong, and Kenneth Pomeranz to discuss the seminar's implications for world history. We are planning to publish the contributions to the seminar and conference in a sequel to the forthcoming proceedings of the conference on ancient Rome and China held at Stanford in May 2005 (Scheidel, ed. forthcoming).

We will ask each of the invited speakers to describe their impression of the nature of the evidence available for this period in their region and the interpretive problems it poses, and then to address as many as possible of the following topics in the context of their region:

1. The relevance of climate and environment, including the distribution of natural resources, to political unification and fragmentation.
2. The relevance of disease and demography to political unification and fragmentation.

3. How military systems (tactics, technology, organization, logistics, etc.) and population movements affected political reunification.
4. How economic institutions favored or inhibited reunification.
5. The resilience and survival of institutions and administration from Roman or Han times, and how these institutions and administration affected reunification.
6. How class structures and the relationships between state office-holders and local elites affected reunification.
7. How cultural commitments to the ideal of a single empire affected reunification.
8. The relevance of the spread of universalizing religions (particularly Christianity and Islam in the West, Buddhism and Daoism in the East) to reunification.

No single model dominates historians' accounts of the period 500-800 CE in either Eastern or Western Eurasia, but on the whole Chinese historians have tended to emphasize variables 5, 6, and 7 in explaining the Sui-Tang restoration, while Western Eurasian scholars put most emphasis on variables 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8.

The organizers' working hypothesis at this stage is that variables 2 and 3 ultimately account for the most important differences between the outcomes in East and West. Eurasia-wide processes meant that both regions saw terrible plagues from the 160s CE onward and experienced large-scale migrations into their territory beginning in the third century, but our initial impression is that disease and migration (variables 2 and 3) both impacted the West more strongly than the East; and that these were the main independent variables driving greater economic fragmentation (variable 4) and loss of institutions and administrative traditions (variable 5) in the West, and the eventual division of the West between Christendom and Islam along very different lines from the coexistence of Buddhism, Daoism, and traditional Confucianism in the East (variable 8). Our impression is that in both the East and the West many people showed strong commitment to the ideal of the reviving the Han and Roman Empires (variable 7), but that if anything, the early-medieval European desire for a single Christian Empire was even stronger than the Chinese desire for unity. This would suggest that variable 7 had little causal power, and was itself partly a function of the scale of fragmentation. However, we retain open minds about all these relationships, and particularly about how variable 7, class structures and the relationships between state office-holders and local elites, might have affected the state's fiscal and military ability to respond to population movements in each region. Despite the increasing availability of paleoclimatological data, historians have barely begun exploring the role of climate and the environment in the events of 500-800 CE (variable 1; though see Elvin 2004; Fagan 2004: 189-246), and we hope to make a valuable contribution by exploring this question.

We anticipate that the seminar will produce three main outcomes. First, we want to generate a series of multi-authored essays and perhaps books that will put forward comprehensive models of the first great divergence. Second, we want to lay the foundation for thinking more seriously about the relationship between the first and second great divergences, and perhaps for reassessing the entire claim that imperial unity vs. national fragmentation is the key variable in understanding Europe and China's different paths in the second millennium CE. Third, we want to provide an example for faculty and students of how comparative international research that takes history seriously can shape our understanding of contemporary global processes.

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