



China's Historic Error

Last time I wrote about the dynamic and innovative economy of Song China. Had China continued to develop as it did under that dynasty we would undoubtedly be talking now of “the Industrial Revolution of the fourteenth century.” However, this did not happen. Instead China gradually lost the dynamism and inventiveness that for so long had made it the most advanced civilization on the planet. By 1800 it had fallen behind Europe.

The actual historical story can be told straightforwardly. Despite its strengths, Song China never developed an effective military system. Instead it relied on mercenaries, diplomacy, and paying off outside threats. In 1126 a people from beyond the Great Wall, the Jurchen, overran all of North China and captured Kaifeng and Liaoyang. The dynasty was saved by another great emperor, Song Gaozong, who moved the capital to Hangzhou. The loss of Northern China did not prove fatal, but it was a foretaste of something much worse.

In 1162 a man was born in Central Asia. His name was Temujin, but he is remembered by the title he took in 1183—Ghengis Khan. He united all the Mongol tribes by 1204 and created a uniquely powerful and effective military system. In 1206 he declared himself “Khan of Khans,” and by 1215 he had conquered the Jin empire. By the time he died in 1227 he had created the

largest empire in human history. The Song resisted Mongol attacks for many years, but finally between 1268 and 1279 the Mongols, led by Kuhlai Khan and his great general Bayan, conquered the whole of China. They established a new dynasty, the Yuan, and ruled until 1368. This was a catastrophe for China, made worse by the devastating impact of the Black Death. By 1370 the population had fallen to half of its level under the Song.

In 1368 the peasant rebel Zhu Huanchang proclaimed himself Emperor, taking the name Ming Hongwu, so founding a new dynasty, the Ming. Hongwu ruled from 1368 to 1398, and the dynasty was consolidated by his son Ming Yongle (1403–1424). It faced increasing difficulties from the late sixteenth century; in 1644 the last Ming Emperor hanged himself in the gardens of the imperial palace.

A new dynasty then came to power, the Qing. It was Manchu, not Chinese, but it adopted Chinese ways. Initially successful, the early Qing Emperors, such as Kangxi (1661–1722) and Qianlong (1736–1795), are seen as among China's greatest rulers. The dynasty ruled China, but under increasing pressure from both internal revolt and European imperialism, until it was overthrown in 1911.

Thus despite recovery and success under the Ming and Qing, China never recovered the dynamism it had known under the Song. In science, technology, and economic productivity it gradually lost its leading position.

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Why did this happen? The simple explanation is the Mongol conquest. However, China recovered from that disaster under the Ming by most measures, and the institutions created under the Song were still extant when the Mongols were expelled in 1368.

It has been popular to blame cultural factors, particularly the impact of the (allegedly) conservative, backward-looking, and anti-trade philosophy of Confucianism. Authors taking this view, such as David Landes, contrast the way European culture encouraged innovation with the conservatism and systematic resistance to change that they see in Chinese culture. Again though, this will not wash. Confucianism had been an important part of Chinese culture since the formation of the Chinese state. It was the dominant, official ideology under the Song. So why did it only come to have such a retarding effect after that dynasty?

Contingent Reasons?

Another response, put by scholars such as Kenneth Pomeranz, is that China after the Song continued to develop, but failed to maintain its lead over Europe for purely contingent and accidental reasons. Pomeranz puts great stress on one factor, that China's coal reserves were both geologically inaccessible and geographically remote, making a steam-powered industrial revolution like the one in Europe impossible.

This argument has some force, but again there are serious problems. While Ming and Qing China did see continued development in a number of areas, there were many others (such as maritime technology) where not only did innovation cease, but entire technologies were abandoned. Most importantly, this argument misunderstands European economic history. The role of steam power in the "Industrial Revolution" is now known to have been exaggerated; there was no single sudden technological breakthrough.

In fact the Mongols were to blame, but indirectly. The real reason for China's loss of momentum was the response of the Chinese

elite to the shock of barbarian conquest. The Ming Emperors believed that Song policy had produced a weak, divided polity and had undermined the stability of traditional Chinese society.

In reaction they introduced a set of policies that deliberately reversed many of the key features of the Song. Those policies were continued and even intensified under the Qing. The consultative government and rule of law found under the Song were replaced by a highly centralized and autocratic government, entirely dependent on the Emperor.

Long-distance trade was discouraged, as was overseas trade, and after 1430 all trade by sea was stopped. In general the Song policy of relying on taxes on trade and encouraging it (to bring in revenue) was reversed, and the traditional agrarian taxes were restored. The Ming and Qing sought to make peasant farmers the basic unit of society; free movement was stopped. Several technologies were abandoned or deliberately abolished. The Ming encouraged the formation of large regional merchant cartels, which were favored by the state and given monopolies over key commodities such as lead, iron, and salt. In general, the policy was to discourage and regulate innovation and to promote social stability at the expense of growth.

In the medium term this policy was a success, partly because after about 1600 China had no serious competitors in Eastern Asia. In the long run, however, it led to the series of catastrophes that afflicted China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

What does this tell us? First, it shows that modernity and its benefits are not inevitable or irreversible. An "Industrial Revolution" was cut off and reversed in the fourteenth century by deliberate policy.

Second, as Joel Mokyr points out, this was possible for one reason. Unlike Europe, China was not politically divided. Instead there was a single state, headed by one ruler. This made it possible for the state to stop economic progress in a way not possible in a system of competing sovereignties such as Europe. This has clear implications for our own times. □