

# Asia in the ReMaking of the Modern World

By Robert B. Marks

*How did our world—the modern world—get to be the way it is? By that I mean a world structured by an increasingly globalized industrial capitalism coupled with the nation state, and consequences arising from those two driving forces (e.g. rising living standards for some, but also international war, global poverty, and environmental degradation), and by 1900, military and economic domination of the world by Europe. Until recently, the answers to those questions have revolved around what happened in Europe in general, and for industry, in England in particular.*

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**T**he usual story of the modern world thus is told in the narrative of “the Rise of the West” or “the European miracle” in which endogenous developments—sometimes seen as arising relatively recently, sometimes in medieval times (ca. 1300), or sometimes as long ago as the Greeks with their democratic institutions—propel “progress,” “development,” and “advancement” in Europe, while the rest of the world, in particular Asia, “stagnates” under “despotic” rulers and “backward” economies. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, this version of the story continues, the secrets of how to become modern diffused from Europe to Japan, pointing the way for others in the twentieth century. Modernity thus has been seen as a uniquely European invention, but one that can be universally adopted—if only non-Europe would change their cultures and institutions (a comprehensive version of this argument is synthesized in Landes 1998). In the twentieth century, when the Soviet Union existed and China was building socialism, the diffusion process was called “modernization” to distinguish it from industrialization under communist auspices; now that challengers to capitalism have been vanquished, the process is called “globalization.”

In “the Rise of the West” narrative of how the modern world came to be, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century creators of social science, in particular Karl Marx and Max Weber, sought to explain European uniqueness by looking at Asia in general, and China in particular, asking the famous negative question: Why did capitalism not develop in China? Weber found the answer in cultural differences, while Marx implied the despotism of Asian states. Europe was rational, disciplined, scientific, inventive, and dynamic, and modernity was imminent in its historical development (a very Hegelian idea); the rest, Asia in general and China in particular, was passive, irrational, lazy, despotic, and incapable on its own of developing modern institutions (Hobson 2004: ch. 10).

For over a century, Western social science accepted the idea of European exceptionalism and sought, as one of its primary intellectual goals, to explain it. That task not only continues to inform much contemporary historical inquiry, but also to structure world history texts and courses. The implication of this body of scholarship is that Europe possessed unique characteristics that allowed it—and only it—to modernize first, and hence gave it the moral authority and the power to diffuse “modernity” around the globe, where cultural, political, or economic “obstacles” prevented modern development from occurring indigenously. Hence this storyline purports to explain (and sometimes to justify and defend) the rise of the West to global dominance. It is Eurocentric history.

But so what? It’s true, isn’t it? Maybe not. What if this whole way of looking at the making of the modern world—“the rise of the West” and the spread of its system on the basis of its supposed superiority to the rest of the world—is wrong?

That is the possibility raised in the body of recent scholarship on Asia by a group of scholars dubbed the “California school” (because they lived or published in California).<sup>1</sup> Their work is shaking up the historical profession and prompting historians to produce new narratives of the making of the modern world. Four important books, all conceptually ground-breaking, have challenged the master narrative of the “rise of the West:” R. Bin Wong’s *China Transformed* (1997); André Gunder Frank’s *ReOrient* (1998); James Lee and Wang Feng’s *One-Quarter of Humanity* (1999), and Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence* (2000). In all, Asia or China now figures prominently in the story of the modern world. While each of these books has its own argument and evidence, and none is an easy read, the cumulative effect has been to challenge the idea that Europe’s historical experience should be considered the norm (Wong), to argue that Asia was at least as developed as Europe (or more precisely, parts of each were equally advanced) until 1800 or later (Pomeranz and Frank), to show that Malthusian arguments about China’s tendency toward chronic overpopulation are wrong (Lee and Wang), to demonstrate that all of the factors historians have cited for Europe’s “rise” can be found in China (Pomeranz), and hence to show that new explanations must be found for why England industrialized first and the forces of modernity then transformed Western Europe before the rest of the world. In turn, I have made the results of these scholars (and more) accessible to students and the general public in my book, *The Origins of the Modern World* (2002 and 2006).

Let me cite two specific examples of the way this new scholarship questions the “rise of the West” narrative.

One of the answers to the question of what caused “the European miracle” concerns families and the number of children each family had. The argument goes something like this: after the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century, various economic and environmental pressures prompted Europeans to marry late, thereby reducing family size. Fewer children meant farming families could begin to accumulate capital, thus sending Europe on its way to an “industrious revolution” that incorporated the Industrial Revolution. “By delaying marriage,” according to a recent history, “European peasants set a course that separated them from the rest of the world’s inhabitants” (Huppert 1998: 13).

While it may be true that west European peasants did in fact behave that way, thereby freeing themselves from “instinctive patterns of behavior” (i.e. the unregulated child-bearing that Thomas Malthus assumed had condemned China to overpopulation and poverty), it simply is not true that European peasants were unique in this behavior. Recent work on China’s demographic system by James Lee and Wang Feng (1999) shows that rural families there too—and probably for a lot longer—limited family size, although the methods used differed. Indeed, Lee and Wang demonstrate that everything Malthus thought about China was wrong. In this instance alone, one prop has been removed from underneath the claim of the uniqueness of Europeans and the reasons for their “rise.”

Take private property and free markets as another example, both of which European institutional historians (e.g. North 1976) have identified as unique to Europe and hence explanatory of its “rise.” What we now know is not only that private property in land ownership was protected by legal code in China, and that free markets for land, labor, capital, and commodities existed in China, but that commodity markets in late imperial China (ca. 1400–1800) were *more efficient* than those in Europe (Marks 1996 and 1998). In many ways, China was “freer” than Europe. No wonder historians of Asia have come to doubt the prevailing wisdom.

More broadly in the new “California school” scholarship, the economic engine driving global trade for centuries before 1800—and with it exchanges of ideas, new food crops, as well as manufactured goods—was in Asia, with the Indian Ocean being the crossroads of trade among the most developed regions of the world. Probably as early as 1000 CE, China’s economic and population growth stimulated the entire Eurasian continent; another surge came after about 1400 and lasted until 1800 or so. Asia was the source of a huge demand for silver to keep the economies of China and India growing, and also the world’s greatest source of manufactured goods (especially textiles and porcelain) and spices as well

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

### Learning More about "The Great Debate"

The question of nineteenth-century Europe's rise, along with Asia's relative decline, constitutes one of the most exciting intellectual controversies in world history. In addition to the "California School" titles included in this article, readers who wish to gain a better sense of this controversy and an understanding of traditional arguments for Europe's rise should examine David Landes' 1998 book, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some are So Rich and Some So Poor*, Douglass C. North's and Robert Paul Thomas' 1976 book, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (both are mentioned in Professor Marks' essay), or some of North's more recent works. The 1998 exchanges between the late André Gunder Frank and Professor Landes are also illuminating. Interested readers can search the two scholars' names online and read their arguments and counter arguments (also see citation at the end of this article titled "Economic History Debate"). Readers who desire more knowledge about this ongoing controversy should pay particular attention to notes one and three in the reference section of Marks' article.

My thanks go to Chris Gray for his advice about this topic.

(Flynn and Giraldez 1995; Atwell 2005). Also very significant was the creation of Islam and the expansion, from the seventh to the seventeenth centuries, of Islamic empires westward into the Mediterranean Sea and eastward into the Indian Ocean as far as Indonesia. In this vision of world history, Asia is central and Europe is peripheral.<sup>2</sup> Where Asia attracted the attention and interest of traders from all over Eurasia, the Islamic empire blocked direct European access to the riches of Asia, stimulating a desire among Europeans to find new sea routes to the Indian Ocean and China.

Even Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas and Vasco da Gama's sailing around Africa to get into the Indian Ocean would not have done much for European fortunes had they not stumbled upon vast quantities of silver in the New World with which to buy Asian goods, and forced African slaves to work New World plantations after European diseases had killed off most of the native American population. Fortunately for Europeans, these accidental developments enabled them to "buy a ticket on the Asian train," in André Gunder Frank's formulation (Frank 1998), to buy Asian manufactured goods, stimulate their economies, and begin to develop to levels reached earlier by China and India. Europeans jumped to strings pulled from Asia, regardless of whether or not Europeans or their historians could see them.

As late as 1750, as parts of Europe approached the levels of development reached in key areas of Asia, all—not just in Asia but in Western Europe as well—began butting up against environmental limits to further growth, in particular shortages of land. Being agricultural and getting their sources of energy from stored annual stocks of solar energy (e.g. crops), people across Eurasia were having to invest greater and greater amounts of labor into the existing land to get agricultural returns to sustain rising populations. Those smaller and smaller returns limited further economic growth.

Except . . . except in England, where easily accessible coal deposits luckily enabled the British to escape from these constraints by beginning to industrialize on the basis of coal, steam power, iron, and steel. In both the "rise of the West" narrative and the new narrative of the making of the modern world, the Industrial Revolution is a crucial factor that explains European dominance over the past two centuries. The difference in the two narratives is its explanation. The "rise of the West narrative" sees the Industrial Revolution as arising wholly from endogenous forces, either within England only or western Europe more broadly. These explanations might differ on how long in preparation the Industrial Revolution was, either arising quite rapidly and representing a sharp break with the past, as Arnold Toynbee, the originator of the term, argued in the 1880s, or more gradually over centuries, as Jan de Vries (1994) argues with his concept of an "industrious revolution" preceding the broader process of industrialization—but they agree on the uniquely European origins of industrialization.<sup>3</sup>

Not so the new narrative, as implied in the title of Kenneth Pomeranz's book, *The Great Divergence*. Without coal or New World colonies with slaves for its market and source of raw materials, Pomeranz argues, England would most likely have continued on a path where it remained agricultural, with farmers there investing increasing amounts of labor to make up for shortages of land. To that extent, England (and hence Europe) would have looked increasingly like the labor-intensive agricultural regime of nineteenth-century China. Conversely, if China had had more conveniently located sources of coal, and peripheries with unfree instead of free labor, it too could as easily have industrialized. As it was, England had both, China had neither, hence "the Great Divergence" around 1800. Britain then applied the fruits of industrialization, in particular, iron, steel, and steam power, to the means of war, creating the first all-iron, steam-powered gunboat—the *Nemesis*—and using it to great effect to win the Opium War (1839–42) with China (Marks 2006, ch. 5).

In retrospect, the tipping of the scales against China would not have happened had Britain not begun to industrialize and to apply industry to its military. Moreover, industrialization there was contingent upon Britain having a peculiar kind of periphery in the New World, one that needed Britain's manufactured goods, especially cotton textiles, to clothe African slaves. Britain also had the good fortune to be sitting on conveniently-located coal deposits—after it had deforested a good bit of the island to heat London. At both ends of Eurasia, there just wasn't enough land to provide adequate energy to meet human subsistence needs *and* to increase industrial production. Thus, where Asian countries by 1800 remained hemmed in by these ecological limits, Britain first, then other European countries (fearing the

consequences of losing ground to Britain), began to escape by applying sources of stored energy (first coal and then oil) to the production process.

The resulting transformations changed global dynamics, resulting in the boom and bust of the business cycle, growing divisions between new social classes and between the people and the state, growing competition among European states for colonies that would give their economies guaranteed markets and sources of raw materials, and the scrambles for Africa and for concessions in China. Unfortunately, for those parts of the world facing severe ecological constraints, the most powerful El Niño conditions in 500 years developed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, killing tens of millions in drought-induced famines, and driving much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America further into conditions we now call “third world” (Davis 2002).<sup>4</sup>

In summary, the new scholarship presents a global narrative of the origins of the modern world, not the uniqueness of Europe. Unlike the standard Eurocentric narrative, which assumes that the “rise of the West” is the story of the coming of the modern world, this new narrative, drawing upon new scholarship on Asia, Africa, and the New World, constructs a story in which those parts of the world play major roles. The modern world is understood as one marked by industry, the nation state, interstate warfare, a large and growing gap between the wealthiest and poorest parts of the world, and an industrial escape from the previous ecological limits on growth in pre-industrial, agrarian societies. The explanation emphasizes contingencies (such as the conquest of the New World); the broad comparability of the most advanced regions in China, India, and Europe until about 1800; the reasons England was able to escape from common ecological constraints facing all of those regions by the eighteenth century; and a nineteenth-century conjuncture of human and natural forces that solidified a gap between the industrialized and non-industrialized parts of the world. ■

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## NOTES

1. So identified by Jack A. Goldstone (2000): Cameron Campbell, Wang Feng, Jack A. Goldstone, Kenneth Pomeranz, R. Bin Wong, and Richard von Glahn at University of California campuses; Dennis Flynn and Arturo Giraldez at the University of the Pacific; James Lee at the California Institute of Technology; Robert Marks at Whittier College; and André Gunder Frank, who published at the University of California Press. I would add Mike Davis at UC-Irvine. Some of their scholarly work is listed in the suggested readings.
2. An early challenge to the assumptions of European centrality came with Janet Abu-Lughod (1989). A summary of her work is available from the American Historical Association as a pamphlet, *The World System in the Thirteenth Century: Dead-End or Precursor?* (Washington D.C.: American Historical Association, 1993). More recently, Philippe Beaujard (2005) has argued for the centrality of Asia in the world system from ancient to early modern times.
3. This brief article is not intended to be a comprehensive historiography of the debate over "the rise of the West," but, with such a complex phenomenon, it should not be surprising that the historiography is likewise as complex. Nonetheless, and at the risk of oversimplifying, historians who see the Industrial Revolution arising from unique European (or English) characteristics include those like Landes (1998), who emphasizes culture, drawing on Weberian traditions, as well as those more inclined to use economic, social, or institutional explanations, such as Jones (1981), Brenner (1985 and 2002), de Vries (1994), Wallerstein (1974), and North (1976). A recent addition to the cultural explanation is Stark (2005). Despite their differences (and they are substantial; e.g. Jones 2005), they all posit the centrality of Europe in making the modern world and hence contribute to a Eurocentric master narrative of the "rise of the West." Pomeranz (2000), Frank (1998), Wong (1997), Lee and Wang (1999), Hobson (2004) and Marks (2002 and 2006) all challenge the Eurocentric narrative. Goldstone (2002) sees the Industrial Revolution as one of several cases of economic "efflorescences" that have occurred elsewhere in the world at various times, but were cut short for different reasons.
4. El Niño is one part of a global climate condition scientists call ENSO, for El Niño-Southern Oscillation, driven by the relative heating or cooling of the eastern Pacific Ocean. When the ocean waters warm, it produces extra rain in the Americas, but brings drought conditions to vast regions of Asia and Africa, and to northeastern South America, sometimes lasting for more than a year. When the eastern Pacific cools, the effects are reversed.

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