

Source: [KBhHIST201KennedyStillHoldsUp](#)

1 | Essay 1: how does Kennedy Hold Up?

General Information

Due Date	Topic	Important Documents
Wednesday by 11:59pm	Throwing Shade on Kennedy	Kennedy, chapter1.

Prompt

In Chapter 1 of *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Paul Kennedy sketches out an explanation of why the Ming Dynasty was, on the one hand powerful and prosperous, but ultimately was “a country which had turned in on itself” and subject to “steady relative decline.” Mann, in his chapter on the Ming trade, gives the reader a lot more detail on the nuances of Ming history in this period. Putting Kennedy and Mann into dialogue, does Kennedy’s argument still hold up? In your essay, argue for or against Kennedy’s argument using the details of Ming history analyzed by Mann.

[KBhHIST201ChinasDeclineWRTZhengHe](#) China’s Decline w.r.t. Zheng He

Kennedy Analysis

China had decided to turn its back on the world after Zheng He’s expedition of 1433... There was ... a plausible strategical reason for this decision. The northern frontiers of the empire were again under some pressure from the Mongols ... Yet stopping maritime activity ... does not appear to have been reconsidered when the disadvantages ... became clear: within a century or so, the Chinese coastline and even cities on the Yangtze were being attacked by Japanese pirates... Therefore, a key element in China’s retreat was the sheer conservatism of the Confucian bureaucracy ... In the Ming’s “Restoration” atmosphere, the all-important officialdom was concerned to preserve and recapture the past, not to create a brighter future.

Things that need to be true

1. Japanese pirate’s attack could be resolved by opening overseas trade
2. Pressure from the Mongols warrants a reconsidering
3. The past means complete shutdown and against reopening

To prove that Kennedy is stupid, we need to prove...

1. Reopening trade, especially with Zheng He ships, ~~does not actually stop coastal rebels~~ does not actually help in the long run
2. ~~Mongols (and perhaps others?) are actually really bad to warrant a full, permanent, diversion of resources~~ Mongol war is, although important, only a cover for a bigger scene of infighting, so could not be easily, simply “reconsidered”
3. Trade and maritime trade happening in the past w/ Confucian government.

Claim Synthesis

Reopening trade does not stop help in the long run

- China actually tried this! @ [KBhHIST201MannMing](#)
 - Can't really control rebels from the coast, as Kennedy admitted
 - Coastal commissioner of Fu Jian threw in the towel after trying everything he could think of
 - Wrote home (Beijing) to trade again, leading to a reliance to Silver

[KBhHIST201ChinasDeclineWRTReopening](#) China's Decline w.r.t Reopening

The government reversed course not only because it recognized its inability to stop smuggling, or because it had begun to appreciate how much Fujian's populace depended on trade. Beijing had come to realize that the nation desperately needed the merchants' most important good: silver.

- After some kurfluffle with local currency surrounding [KBhHIST201ChinasDeclineWRTCurrency](#) China's Decline w.r.t. Currency, became reliant on silver
 - Official currency too unstable due to hyper in/deflation
 - Relied on in-kind and silver payment as stable income store
- As trade is happening, we got a little thing called [KBhHIST201ProblemsWithSilver](#) Problems with Silver
 - Large silver store found in the Americas Potosí mines @ [KBhHIST201HomogenosceneLN](#)
 - Causing a larger devaluing of the thing

In 1642, so much silver has been produced that its value is falling even as the mines slacken.

=> Which, caused a failing of the Chinese economy

Like the Spanish king, the Ming emperor backs his military ventures with Spanish silver, which his subjects must use to pay their taxes. When the value of silver falls, the government runs out of money.

So, it doesn't really matter trade/no trade; pirates/no pirates — there exists a fundamental problem with the Chinese economy's basis on a currency so easily influenced by the central government that's still learning how a globalized economy works.

Mongols are pretty darn bad, but ultimately only a scapegoat for a bigger problem

- Mongols never really left
 - Strong military holds lead to extended fights
 - Eventually, we ended up with the Manchus leading the country

The Manchus were descended from the Jurchen Jin dynasty rulers who had taken north China during Song times. The Manchu forces were the most capable and well-disciplined in the empire.

But! It's not even like that's the problem, anyway.

- Larger military threats from the Mongols were also paired with party *infighting*
 - Zheng He became sacrifice for infighting [KBhHIST201ChinasDeclineWRTZhengHe](#)
 - 郑和's son aligned with faction opposing him
 - So, he canceled the voyages as a show of strength

They had become a target in political infighting—one bureaucratic faction championing them, another trying to take down the first by decrying their expense ... Yongle's son and successor aligned with the faction that opposed his father's policies.

The mongol attacks, as admitted by Kennedy, are pretty bad. However, they *never really left*, so its not a one-time problem that could, as per the language of Kennedy, simply be “reconsidered” after its, as inferred by Kennedy, *delt with*.

Furthermore, saying that the voyages' costs are too high are a mask for a bigger (or, in some respects, smaller?) problem — that its simply political tribalism within the Ming court decrying the prices of these attacks trying to hide the tribalism itself; so... this would no be solved even after the Mongols are gone — they will simply find something else to blame or the emperor will just... die and switch faction.

Conservative Confucian government ≠ No Trade!

Han Salt and Iron Debate => “good ol' times” according to Kennedy, no? 81 AD

- Confucians actually arguing *against* central control and monopolies

The purpose of merchants is circulation and the purpose of artisans is making tools. These matters should not become a major concern of the government.

- Kennedy indeed *misinterpreted* the Confucian view
 - *Governments* should not be **concerned** with trade
 - Natural trade — without an emphasis on profit from the government — should neither be encouraged nor discouraged
 - Does not mean monopoly and limit

When profit is not emphasized, civilization flourishes and the customs of the people improve. ... At present the government ignores what people have and exacts what they lack. The common people then must sell their products cheaply to satisfy the demands of the government. ... Quick traders and unscrupulous officials buy when goods are cheap in order to make high profits.

- Confucian tenant is not to limit trade, Kennedy Style, instead, focus on limitation of market forces
 - Additional restrictions on trade causes citizens to pander to the trader + causing hyperdeflation => this actually happened!
 - China closed trade after Zheng He, smugglers became rampant
 - Even Kennedy acknowledged this...
 - Fujian actively invited smugglers to sustain trade

Fujian depended on the sea ... when international trade was officially banned, Fujianese found themselves in an uncomfortable position—there was nothing for them on land ... So Fujianese traders invited three thousand Japanese and Portuguese smugglers to reoccupy the former Dutch base at Wu Island.

- Market economy, and *not morality* takes over, against Confucian principles

Kennedy incorrectly interpreted the viewpoint of trade from the Confucian perspective. Through the Salt and Iron debates, Confucian scholars indeed is trying to convince a struggling Han dynasty *from* imposing a strict trade limitation. This is because the central Confucian tenant of *morality* warrents merchants to stay in their place — promoting circulation — and not driving market economies. Through imposing a trade ban, the Confucian philosophers rightly believe that it would cause a hyperdeflation — causing merchants to have more opportunity to “wrongly” prosper.

Defluffifying

Again, here's Kennedy:

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In Kennedy's claim of China relying on conservative Confucianism being the driving force behind China's closing of its maritime activities, the author fails to recognize the difficulty of sustaining trade in a failing economy, political infighting blamed on stenthering rebels, and in fact misinterprets the Confucian philosophies of trade — creating a faulty argument

- Economic reopening can't save China in the long run in a failing economy, making reopening less effective as claimed
- Mongols are threat that never was "resolved", and hence here used as a scapegoat for bigger political infighting
- Confucianism embraced trade as a means to allow goods circulation, so emulating traditional Confucian philosophy does not mean shutting trade down

Now, defluffify by re-writing the three points + so what in as little words as possible.

In Robert Kennedy's claim of the traditionalist Confucian reasoning behind the Ming government's halting of maritime activities after Zheng He's voyage of 1433, Kennedy cast a faulty argument that not only ignores both the ineffectiveness of reopening trade and the Ming court's usage of Mongolian invasions as scapegoat for political infighting but also misinterprets the central moral tenant of Confucian philosophy that favors natural market circulation as a complete ideological ban on trade.

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