



Book Why the West Rules – for Now

The Patterns of History and What They Reveal About the Future

Ian Morris
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Recommendation

This panoramic history offers formidable reading about the comparative development of Western and Eastern civilizations. It catalogs significant archeological, scientific and political events of 16,000 years of human history and several millennia in the life of the planet. Historian Ian Morris explains the forces that allowed Western civilization to overtake Eastern civilization and why this critical balance may now be tipping in favor of the East. This is high-quality academic scholarship: an interdisciplinary analysis, tying together esoteric facts and maps spanning geography, historical theories, paleontology, climatology, archeology and politics. Morris’s book supports his detailed “index of social development” model comparing the evolution of Eastern and Western civilizations. His construct relies on recounting detailed history, analysis and comparisons. This can be challenging reading, albeit leavened by Morris’s visible scholarship and entertaining style. You have to want to finish this book, but if you are a serious reader of history, *BooksInShort* assures you that the effort has very substantial rewards – and if you are building up your ambitions it also makes for fascinating skimming.

Take-Aways

- Civilizations develop due to short-term and long-term historic patterns driven by geography and sociology, and revolving around the performance of individuals.
- The “index of social development” measures technology, ability to wage war and urbanization over time contrasts Eastern and Western civilizations.
- Distinct species evolved differently in the East than in the West.
- Centuries of history saw development and dominance shift, mostly from East to West.
- Throughout history, geography has proven to be the greatest advantage, but other factors also have a major impact, from plague to technology to war.
- By 1919, Paris and London ruled a third of the world’s land and people.
- Steam engines led to the Industrial Revolution, the “biggest and fastest” transformation.
- The East will surpass the West eventually, perhaps this century, but projections vary.
- Advances in nanotechnology, robotics and genetics could make old geopolitical advantages obsolete.
- Which civilization dominates won’t matter unless society manages the dangers of nuclear weapons, climate change, energy demand, disease and pollution.

Summary

Who Rules and Why?

The “index of social development” measures “a group’s ability to master its physical and intellectual environment to get things done.” This model enables a comparison of the unfolding of Eastern and Western civilizations by measuring technology, the ability to wage war, urbanization and energy capture per person in the form of daily

consumption of calories. Tracking these developments creates a basis for comparing the Western civilization that developed in Europe, North America and the Mediterranean Basin with the Eastern one that emerged in the Far East. This model quantifies these comparisons over the flow of history to explain why the West was more developed than the East for most of the past 16 millennia. While the answer is complex and can be politically sensitive, it does not reside in either predestination or accident. The West emerged stronger due to geography and development patterns involving the performance of individuals and societies since the advent of prehumans millions of years ago.

Comparing Civilizations

From 10,800 BC onward, development in the East and West followed similar patterns, despite a time lag between them of several thousand years. Herbert Spencer, a 19th-century English philosopher who “popularized” the term “evolution” (which Darwin borrowed), believed that civilizations mature from being simple to being complex. To prove this theory, scientists had to await the development of suitable techniques in sociology, anthropology and archeology. For example, the discovery of radiocarbon dating in the mid-20th century allowed archeologists to detect the age of their discoveries more accurately.

“The great question for our times...is whether humanity as a whole will break through to an entirely new kind of existence before disaster strikes us down – prematurely.”

However, most comparisons of civilizations fail to measure social development or a community’s ability to accomplish its goals. Other metrics – notably organizational capacity, urban development, information processing and military power – are more useful for assessing social developments over the past 16,000 years, roughly since the end of the last ice age, which hit its coldest point 20,000 years ago. These comparisons show that East and West developed in rough parallel, but their rate of change accelerated dramatically in the past 200 years with “the fastest and greatest transformation in history.” One theory using these calculations says the East’s development will surpass the West’s around 2103, and the gap will widen by 2150.

How the West Was Won

Social developments over the span of recorded history set the stage for discussing the East-West power rivalry. While this snapshot suffers from short-term analysis, it illustrates how more recent events have shaped contemporary life for billions of people. For example, were it not for China’s extraordinary demand for silver, world history may have spun into an entirely different trajectory. By the 16th century, China’s rapidly expanding economy faced a silver shortage. Seizing this opportunity, European traders turned to their conquests in the New World, especially Mexico and Peru, to supply silver for trade. Using Native American labor, Europeans extracted 150,000 tons of precious metals and sent about a third of it to China. When the silver supply began to deplete around 1750, China suffered. That shortage forced Europeans to develop new goods to export to the East.

“My main goal is to explain why a particular set of societies that descends from the original Western core – above all, those of North America – now dominate the globe.”

As of the 1790s, China insisted that Britain pay silver in exchange for tea, China’s largest export. Britain triangulated the trade to include opium it exported from India to China, causing epidemic addiction in China and leading to the Opium Wars. Crushed, China became mired in conflict and stagnation produced by overpopulation, political crises, and widening gaps between rich and poor. Meanwhile, the West turned to coal and steam to launch the Industrial Revolution. By 1842, Britain was a world power, able to send warships and goods anywhere it wished worldwide.

The Archeological Record

Scientists still don’t know if only one kind of ape-men inhabited all parts of the Old World. However, distinct species evolved differently in the East than in the West. Between 1921 and 1937, archeologists in China discovered the bone fragments of the 600,000-year-old Peking Man. This prehuman was about five feet, three inches tall [160cm], with a short, wide face and a large jaw. Europeans found remains of 800,000-year-old “Heidelberg” men in Atapuerca, Spain. The skulls indicated modern-looking noses and cheekbones. Experts believe that wildly different climatic and geographical conditions prompted these diverging variations in the East and the West.

“The West has not been locked into global dominance since the distant past; only after 1800 CE, on the eve of the Opium War, did the West pull ahead of the East, and even that was largely accidental.”

Clearly, human development reacted to changes in climate. By about 10,000 BC, people were living in small groups for protection and better food production. Hunter-gatherer groups began burying their dead in their dwellings to link property and familial descent. By 9300 BC, people built defensive structures in Jericho to protect their homes and food supply. The world’s oldest granaries, dating from 9000 BC in the Jordan Valley, indicate that farmers could increase their food yield. During this period, settlements and farming slowly expanded from western Asia into Europe, perhaps causing a transition from indigenous tongues to Indo-European languages. By 8000 BC, some villages had up to 500 people. Larger concentrations of humans and animals produced unsanitary conditions. By 7000 BC, tuberculosis had spread from goats to their herders in western Iran. In the East, the move toward advanced civilization began in about 8000 BC with the cultivation of wild rice. By 7000 BC, people living between China’s Yellow and Yangzi Rivers domesticated pigs and farmed millet and rice.

Key Determinants of Prosperity

Throughout these centuries, the two core civilizations did not know each other. Even in 326 BC, as Alexander the Great steered his army “into the Punjab, even the best-educated Easterners and Westerners knew almost nothing of each other’s existence.” However, by 200 BC, “the East and West had more in common than at any time since the Ice Age,” and “each was dominated by a single great empire.” Both had large cities, abundant agriculture, far-flung trade and new technology. In the first century BC, the Chinese invented waterwheels for grinding grain, and the Romans made bellows to keep fires ignited. Better fuel sources enabled the production of more wine and wheat, as well as iron nails, which large ships quickly carried to distant ports.

“Geographical advantages are always ultimately self-defeating. They drive up social development, but in the process social development changes what

geography means.”

From 600 BC to 300 BC, many of the world’s great religions emerged, including Judaism, Confucianism, Daoism, Jainism and fast-spreading Buddhism. Upon its introduction, Christianity grew rapidly, drawing a million followers by AD 250. Growing 3.4% annually, it had 10 million adherents by 310. Despite raging civil war, Emperor Constantine recognized the Christian Church and gave it his huge wealth. The Church recognized him, as well. During the next 80 years, it took over pagan temples in “perhaps the biggest redistribution of wealth the world had yet seen.”

The Common Era

Revolutionary developments from the first century AD significantly altered the social development scale. These turning points included peace – which was conducive to trade – and the discovery of new energy sources, including coal, wind, water and natural gas.

“Certainly East and West were different, from the food people ate to the gods they worshipped.”

By the mid-sixth century, the East overtook the West’s social development, due partially to weather and to the migration of Chinese people to the south due to regional wars. By 1050, China had extensive foundries that used coal to produce iron. One smelter employed 3,000 laborers to fill its furnaces with 42,000 tons of coal. But Genghis Khan, the Mongol warrior who plundered his way from the Pacific to the Volga, undermined China’s progress. In 1215, he devastated more than 90 Chinese cities, including Beijing. In 1258, his hordes ruined Baghdad, but left Cairo, the West’s largest city, unscathed. “By the 1270s, when Marco Polo set off for China, the Western core had shifted decisively into the Mediterranean lands that the Mongols had spared.” At the time, China had the world’s largest palaces, shipping industry and developed ruling class.

“Tattooing your face...may make you a rebel in Kansas, but it marks you as a conformist in New Guinea.”

The increase in trade led to an East-West technology transfer. For instance, the wheelbarrow was invented in China around 100 AD but did not appear in Europe until 1250. The most significant East-West transfers were iron tools and disease, and China had a tumultuous century: “The four horsemen of the apocalypse that stalked China in the 13th century – migration, state collapse, famine and disease – reduced the population by perhaps a quarter.” In the mid-1300s, ships carried the Black Plague, “which probably evolved in Inner Asia,” around the Mediterranean. This virulent illness, first described in 1331, killed 30% to 50% of all Westerners and untold Asians, including nine out of 10 people in the Yangzi Valley. Plague killed half China’s army.

“Sloth, greed and fear may be the motors of history, but each of us gets to choose among them.”

Between 1500 and 1800, the West’s development outpaced the East’s. Culture flourished worldwide, from Shakespeare in England to the 20-hour-long *Peony Pavilion* opera in China. Portuguese traders in Macau introduced China to New World produce: “corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, peanuts.” East and West underwent a population boom, filling the void created by the Plague. In the mid-1770s, the advent of the steam engine revolutionized Britain’s cotton mills and transformed its 10,000-year-old textile industry. Steam engines radically changed trains and ships and pumped air into blast furnaces to smelt coke. The Industrial Revolution soon proved to be “the biggest and fastest transformation in...history.” Colonization grew. To meet settlers’ needs, colonists denuded 168 million acres of American forests and planted towns instead.

“It is going to take great statesmanship to preserve the peace in the bewildering 21st century.”

In the 1860s, the East began copying the science and technology behind the West’s “Second Industrial Revolution.” By 1885, Japan was industrializing faster than any other contemporary nation by avoiding war and using internal financing. Its emperor soon allowed political parties, provided education for girls and boys, and granted men voting rights. In contrast, China still opposed modernization, child education and contact with foreigners. By 1896, China had laid 370 miles of railroad track, but Japan already had 2,300 miles. When war broke out, Western powers underestimated the East. In 1904, Japan destroyed Russia’s navy and army. During the 20th century, war reshaped the globe. Empires toppled: China’s last dynasty, the Qing, fell in 1917; Russia’s Romanovs also fell in 1917, followed by Austria’s Habsburgs. Turkey’s Ottomans collapsed in 1922. Two capitals, Paris and London, ruled a third of the world’s land and people by 1919.

The West Peaks as the East Rises

The West has dominated because of its geography, social development and military prowess. Clearly, change happens when people migrate in pursuit of safer, easier, more profitable ways to live. Desperate migrants have a broad impact, from the rise of city-states to the power of industrial revolutions and improved agriculture. People follow parallel trajectories. Several innovators may reach technological or scientific discoveries simultaneously because they use the same methods and pose the same questions. Take longevity: Changes in diet and physical science have extended global life expectancies. Americans and western Europeans live some 30 years longer than their grandparents did. China and Japan have extended life spans by 40 years. The “body has changed more in the last 100 years than in the previous 50,000,” and improved health affects everything from population trends to female emancipation.

“Live ethically, renounce desire and do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and you will change the world.”

The West’s current dominant status is a matter of favorable long-term odds. A variety of sources predict the East will match US productivity this century, but forecasts vary as to when. One problem with projections is that before 2050 – when global population will peak at nine billion – both East and West must undergo serious transformation or face catastrophe. Major scientific advances in nanotechnology, robotics and genetics could make old geopolitical advantages obsolete, but global warming will produce uneven food and water supplies, more refugees, disease, raging fires, rising sea levels, and more pollution. And nuclear danger always looms: By 2060, about 20 nations, many of them with unstable governments, will have nuclear arms. East and West must contain these weapons, combat global warming, and manage energy demand, disease, and pollution. Between 2025 and 2050, the US’s role as global policeman will wane, and its lead over other nations will shorten. One scenario calls for a merger, or “singularity,” between East and West into something called “Chimerica” or “Zhengland.” If the two civilizations can stave off devastation, they may learn they have more in common than not.

About the Author

Ian Morris teaches classics and history at Stanford University, where he is an Archeology Centre fellow. His books include *The Greeks* and *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires*.
