
- **Author:** Kenneth Pomeranz (born 1958)
- **Specialist in** Chinese economic/social history: 1988 PhD
- **Based at University of California Irvine**
- **One of the “California School”**—several historians with similar views on world history are based there.
Divergence between ? and ?

Pomeranz stresses the difficulty of comparing Europe and China

- Neither China nor Europe are homogeneous.
- Within-variation is as great as between-variation.
- Parts of China—e.g. the Yangzi delta—were comparable to parts of Europe—e.g. England or the Netherlands.

Volume of research to synthesise—huge & uneven! The history of parts of Europe—separate states—is much better researched than that of parts of China.
The book makes four main points.

- Eighteenth-century China was well-developed in many ways.
- In most respects Europe's economy was less efficient than China's.
- Europe's relative advance came late, and only with industrialisation.
- Europe's success rested on the accident of finding new resources at just the right time.
The organisation of the book

- The first 4 chapters criticise existing accounts of the factors determining the different paths of Europe and China.
- These chapters are a good survey of some widely held views—the views not always compatible with each other.
- These chapters also provide the background to chapters 5 and 6 giving Pomeranz’s own theory.
Chapter 1 Population, capital accumulation and technology

Population

Life expectancy
“Rough comparability” 38

Birth-rates
“It appears that various groups of Asians were at least as able as any Europeans to keep birthrates down for the sake of maintaining or improving their standard of living.” 41 (Cf. Lee & Feng below.)
Capital accumulation

- Modern theories of economic growth put great weight on capital accumulation but there is not much information on accumulation in this period.
- Pomeranz cannot see any great difference between Europe and China.
Technology

- Pomeranz acknowledges that Europe had more of a scientific culture with potential for supporting technical advance.
- But “arguments that Europe in 1750 already enjoyed a unique level of technological sophistication need significant qualification.” (46)
- England *did* have an advantage in coal production.
Some historians argue that China was backward in the development of efficient markets.

This line is associated with Douglass North Nobel 1983

Pomeranz considers markets for goods and factors of production and finds no big differences in C18.
a) The Market for produce

- Pomeranz has only a brief discussion (86) which contrasts the policy of the state in England and France with policy in China.
- He concludes that the Qing state was more concerned to reduce monopolies in basic items than the European states.
- He does not investigate the relative importance of subsistence agriculture.
b) The Market in Land

- Europe had a history of restrictions on the alienability of land—those restrictions were generally easing by C18.
- “The overwhelming majority of land in all parts of China was more or less freely alienable.” (p. 71),
- Lots of detailed differences (both within and between) but no big and systematic differences.
c) The Labour Market

China and Europe had a history of bound labour—slavery and serfdom.

- By C18 this was rare in Western Europe.

- Labour was more mobile in China than in Western Europe. Long-distance migration was more common.
3 Luxury consumption and the rise of capitalism

- The starting point for this chapter is the work of Werner Sombart, an early 20th-century German historian.
- Sombart argued that the growing demand for luxury goods in Europe produced new kinds of artisans and merchants.
- Pomeranz argues that these developments were not restricted to Europe.
Pomeranz takes issue with the argument of the French historian Fernand Braudel that European capitalism was associated with the rise of a distinctive form of economic organisation—the corporation.

Like Landes, Pomeranz criticises the view that colonial plunder was an important source of European capital.

Pomeranz emphasises how competition between European states stimulated exploration and overseas settlement.
Critical part done—constructive part begins

- Chapters 5 and 6 give Pomeranz’s own theory.
- This extends the land-labour imbalance theory that had formed the basis of Malthus and Mill’s views of future prospects.
5 Ecological strain in W. Europe and E. Asia

- Pomeranz argues that both China and Western Europe faced constraints to growth around 1800.
- The constraints were shortage of land and shortage of fuel.
- Europe, but not China, could evade these constraints.
6 Abolishing the land constraint

- Pomeranz argues that the exploitation of new lands in America eased the land constraint.
- Malthus and Mill had been concerned with the relation between population and the supply of food required to support the population.
- Diminishing returns in agriculture imposed a limit to growth with finite land imposed a limit on growth.
- Mill recognised that the feared stationary state was postponed by the availability of food from the New World.
Landes and Pomeranz

- Landes sees divergence a necessary development from 1000. Pomeranz sees accidents.
- Landes relegates geography. Pomeranz re-instates it. Resources—land and coal—made the difference.
- The disagreement recalls earlier disagreements about the British Industrial Revolution. Was it a matter of knowledge and institutions or a matter of coal?
Other Divergences—the “Needham problem”

- Joseph Needham (1900-1995) found plenty of Chinese science to write about—unlike Hume.
- Needham observed that while European science advanced after C17 Chinese science did not.
- He associated the take-off in Western science with the rise of capitalism.
Direct scientific/technological contacts between Europe and China

- Began when the Jesuit Matteo Ricci took a clock and prisms to China in 1583.
- The Jesuits sent back negative reports on the state of science in China.
- The Qing court patronised Western science—Ricci’s successors included astronomers.
- But there was no integration of European and Chinese science before the C20.
And Malthus? Historical demography

- The 1950s saw the rise of historical demography in Europe.
- In Europe national censuses data began around 1800 but parish records of births and deaths were kept from a much earlier period.
- In the 50s historians began using this information to rewrite Europe’s population history.
Lee and Feng (1999) use what data they can find—including information on

- The Qing imperial genealogy for 1700 to 1840
- Household registers compiled in a Liaoning village between 1774 and 1873
- A sub-sample of 30,000 rural women born during the period from 1914 to 1930, included in the Chinese government’s 1982 1-per-1000 Population Fertility Survey
Each chapter takes off from a statement by Malthus

In general Malthus argued
- that only Europeans exercised foresight.
- In China only positive checks operate

Lee and Feng argue
- that in China fertility was equally rational
- but the values involved were social rather than private.
Lee & Feng argue

- Malthus exaggerated the role of famines in checking population growth.

- Marital fertility was markedly lower than in Europe—the result of slow starting, early stopping and long spacing of childbearing.

- Female infanticide distorted sex ratios led to a gender-unbalanced marriage market and a series of strategies to ensure perpetuation of family lines.
Thoughts on a long and tortuous story

- It belongs to the intellectual history of the West and to such subdivisions as the history of economic thought.
- In 300 years these subjects have changed.
- What was being contemplated was also changing too.
- In the background were changing economic and political relations between two parts of the World.
Broadly—phases of Western interest in China

- In the C18 the existence of a China so different from Europe liberated the thinking of European intellectuals like Voltaire.
- In the C19 and for most of C20 acquaintance brought indifference or contempt--China was just another backward country.
- Recently interest has revived. The interest is much better informed than in the C18 because of advances in historical and social science techniques.
Seminar 4: Write notes on some reviews of these works (JSTOR has more)

**Great Divergence**

**One Quarter of Humanity**