

Analysis and Research on the Turning Points in the Development of Chinese and Western Civilizations

Mingyuan Liu^{1,a,*}

¹High School Attached to Northeast Normal University, Chaoyang, Beijing, 100020, China

a. liu12312006@gmail.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: The 17th century was a significant stage in global history, with the West ushering in the Scientific Revolution and the rise of Enlightenment thinking, and China experiencing the transformations of the Ming and Qing dynasties. These advances have had a profound impact on the development of contemporary society. However, most of the existing studies focus on a single civilization, and there are fewer comprehensive studies on the interaction between Chinese and Western civilizations. The study examines the development of civilisation in ancient China and the West (Europe) through the analysis of existing historical data on China and the West and compares the performance of civilisation in China in the 17th century with that of the West during the same period through a horizontal comparison of the historical processes of the Middle Ages, including the change of polity, the development of the economic system, and the way of education. The results show that China's level of civilisation was higher than that of the West before the 17th century, but the West's civilisation gradually surpassed China's after that. Despite the different paths and speeds of development between China and the West, the turning point in the 17th century had a profound impact on the course of world history (turning point: the 17th century, when China's civilisational development gradually lagged behind that of the West, i.e. the West's entry into a capitalist society).

Keywords: Middle Ages, Ming and Qing dynasties, turning point, feudalism, capitalism.

1. Introduction

Most ancient civilisations originated in major river basins. Ancient Egypt originated in the Nile basin, Mesopotamian civilisation in the Euphrates and Tigris basins, China in the Yangtze and Yellow basins, and ancient India in the Ganges basin. With the development of time and frequent exchanges between regions, the world has become more and more interconnected, promoting cultural exchanges and clashes between different regions and intermingling of nationalities. As the only existing ancient civilisation with a history of more than 5,000 years, China occupies an important position in the world. The historical development of the West has also had a great influence on today's culture, religion, and language.

The earliest writing in the West originated around 1500 BC in the Phoenician alphabet, an epigraphic script that used multiple letters combined into words to express meaning. As a result, the Chinese and Western cultures have huge differences in the basic language and writing, which also leads to the uniqueness of the Chinese and Western civilisations. At the same time, there are

similarities between the two, such as the fact that both China and the West have their legal systems, both through the evolution of customary law into statutory law. For these two very different developments, the turning point is reflected in many aspects. However, most of the literature only analyses and compares the economy and the system at that time, and only analyses and explains the conclusion objectively from a certain point of view, which leads to the inability to discuss the reasons for the occurrence of the "turning point" in a comprehensive way. Therefore, by analysing the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, it is possible to conclude the differences in political systems and ideological differences. On the other hand, because of the many factors that influenced the turning point, it is impossible to ensure a complete integration of historical data.

Studying the turning points of Chinese and Western civilisations is important for understanding the development of world history. It has been studied that before the 17th century, China had a higher level of civilisational development than the West, but between the 17th and 19th centuries, the West gradually surpassed China and entered a capitalist society. However, most of these studies have focused on the economic and institutional levels and lacked an in-depth exploration of the cultural and intellectual turning points. This study examines the development of civilisation (political system, economy, culture, and ideology) in ancient China and the West (Europe) through a vertical analysis and a horizontal comparison to reveal the turning points in the development of civilisation in China and the West and their causes. Through the analysis of historical materials and literature, this paper aims to refine the uniqueness of the development of Chinese and Western civilisations and explore the various reasons that led to their turning points.

2. Differences between the Chinese and Western political systems

Li mentioned that the feudal system in Western Europe was rigid, while the feudal system in China was flexible [1]. From the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century, during the Ming and Qing dynasties in China, the centralisation of feudal authoritarianism gradually reached its peak. During the same period, the West was characterised by the Renaissance, humanism, and the emergence of the urban economy (The beginnings of capitalism), which was very different from that in China. Han Yunlin explains that rigid institutions under a strict hierarchy make it difficult for social classes to move and appear to be hard, but break at the first blow, whereas a flexible society lacks a strict hierarchy, has a high variability of power institutions, and has a high capacity for social adaptability and self-adjustment [2]. This is one of the reasons why the West was the first to enter capitalist society.

In the early West (9th-15th centuries), kings and high nobles owned large tracts of land, which were divided by feudalisation among lower nobles and commoners. At the local level, the manorial system was practised, where the lord of the manor controlled the farming of the serfs and personal dependency was strong. This also gave rise to a system of strong personal dependency, the vassalage system, Thomas M. B. King examines the feudal revolution and its impact on European society, describing how the feudal lord ruled his vassals through his fiefs and how his vassals served him militarily and politically. He analyses how this relationship shaped European feudal society, emphasising the strict hierarchy of "my vassal's vassal is not my vassal", which made class mobility difficult [3]. Long oppressed by the lower classes and encouraged by new ideas, the peasant class revolted, causing great damage to the feudal institutions. At the same time, the spread of the Black Death, which killed large numbers of people, weakened the power of the aristocracy and the landed classes. The development of trade and cities led to the replacement of the feudal natural economy with the money economy, and the rise of the merchant and bourgeois classes also had an impact on the feudal system.

Around 1500, with geographical discoveries and the opening of new shipping routes, the first global market was formed, facilitating international trade and colonial expansion and the accumulation of capital, laying the foundations of the capitalist system. With the establishment of the

capitalist system, the Western feudal system formally collapsed. Mi mentions that "seventeenth-century China was in the transitional period of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, during which the political system was still a centralised imperial system, while in the West, especially in Britain, it had begun to enter the budding stage of constitutional monarchy. This difference led to a marked difference in the response and efficiency of the political system between China and the West in dealing with internal and external crises" [4]. As a result, the monarchical dictatorship in China during the same period (Ming and Qing dynasties) was further strengthened.

At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming Dynasty, abolished the prime ministers and the imperial power was strengthened like never before, and at the same time a guard system was established to strengthen the national defence. All these systems illustrated the strength of the central government and the greatness of imperial power. As a result, the kind of peasant uprisings that occurred in the West could hardly achieve significant results in China. In addition, the continuous development and improvement of the imperial examination system facilitated the mobility of many social classes, and there was less class entrenchment. Although the budding of capitalism also appeared in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the development of trade was not emphasised, but rather suppressed, because the small peasant economy was the mainstay of feudal autocracy in ancient China, and the lower class of merchants also suppressed the emergence of capitalism. The emergence of the capitalist system disintegrated the feudal autocracy, but as mentioned above, the Chinese feudal system was an elastic system, which ensured its long and stable operation.

3. Reasons for the faster development of capitalist regimes than feudal autocracies

Marx mentioned in the Communist Manifesto that "the bourgeoisie has created more productive forces in less than a hundred years of a class rule than in all previous generations". Capitalism's emphasis on private property and free trade and its high degree of commodification also contributed to social development and technological progress. The pursuit of wealth by capitalists contributed to the opening of new shipping routes and the formation of world markets, as well as to the development of natural science and the two industrial revolutions. This unprecedented development of the productive forces was the ultimate pursuit of surplus value by the bourgeoisie. But fundamentally it was due to the emancipation of Western thought and the establishment of the capitalist system, which did not restrict the class mobility of people and emphasised commerce over agriculture. The ruling class had less power, which encouraged free trade. Atkinson analysed the feudal and capitalist economies and pointed out that the feudal autocracy lacked such institutional innovations under the feudal system, which led to the rigidity of the economic and social structure [5]. China was a feudal dictatorship from the Qin dynasty to the Qing dynasty. After two thousand years of development and institutional innovation, the power of the monarch was maximised and control over the citizens was extremely strong. Coupled with the government's control over people's minds, people did not have the concept of business development. Coupled with the government's lack of attention to the commercial market. Most people chose to "buy land" only when they had money.

Li Zhongqing mentions that although China's economy flourished at certain times, the lack of continuous technological innovation and industrialisation led to a gradual decline in its position in the global economic system [6]. Liu Shiping pointed out that the reason for this backwardness was that the Chinese scientific system during the Ming and Qing dynasties was restricted by traditional Confucianism, and scientific ideas and experimental methods were not effectively developed and promoted [7]. As a result, the vast majority of the natural sciences developed in ancient China were in the service of agriculture. For example, the twenty-four solar terms of traditional Chinese culture were designed to measure agricultural time. Zu's calculation of pi was only for calculating the land area to facilitate the government's tax collection. During the Ming and Qing dynasties (in 1582, when

the first Western missionary, Matteo Ricci, arrived in China), Western missionaries came to China as missionaries and brought a lot of scientific knowledge with them. However, this knowledge was circulated only among the upper classes, and the commoners had no access to it, so it could not be fully developed. The stagnation of the means of production prevented the rapid development of the productive forces. The closed state policy of the Qing dynasty also reflected the closed nature of feudal despotism. In the era of global interconnectedness, the closure of foreign exchange and trade condemned the economy to backwardness and stagnation of development. All in all, the economic and intellectual development of capitalism was stronger than that of feudalism, and the policy of openness and freedom and the degree of control by the rulers were the reasons why Western capitalism developed faster than the Chinese feudal system.

4. Reasons for the development of Western thought over Chinese thought in the Middle Ages (15th-17th centuries)

Yi mentioned that "during the Renaissance, humanistic education in Britain had a distinctive epochal character. In the first period, it is expressed as Christian humanism represented by Collett, which focuses on the use of humanistic methods to study the Bible, and its ultimate purpose is to worship God; in the later period, it is expressed as realistic humanism represented by Milton, which emphasises the connection between humanistic education and secular life, and its real purpose is to cultivate the talents needed in real life " [8]. Explaining that humanism was advocated after the Renaissance in the Middle Ages in the West to cultivate practical talents, accompanied by the development of university education, many scientists and inventors came out of nowhere (Copernicus (1473-1543) proposed heliocentricity for the first time, laying the foundation for modern astronomy, Galileo (1564-1642) made breakthroughs in mechanics and kinematics) The development of literature and philosophy was also extremely rapid, with philosophers Thinkers emphasised humanism and human rights. In an era of weakened papal power, humble kingship, and open-mindedness, people recognised, accepted, and adapted to new things to a greater extent, and new ideas were implemented in the minds of citizens, contributing to the formation of the modern state.

At the same time, China was in the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the monarchy was at its height. In his book, Joseph Lee identifies the reasons why China failed to keep pace with the Western scientific revolution in the 15th to 17th centuries. He argues that the dominance of Confucianism and the limitations of the imperial examination system caused Chinese society to place insufficient emphasis on science and technological innovation. In addition, China's centralised power system limited the free exchange of ideas and innovation [9]. During the reign of Zhu Di, Emperor Chengzu of the Ming Dynasty, freedom of speech began to be controlled, and the introduction of "writing prisons" (cases in which people were punished for their speech and writing) severely restricted the free development of ideas. Although the imperial examination system continued to improve, the "eight-legged essays" (essays with a fixed format and chapter and verse) became the main content of the examination, restricting the freedom and creativity of the candidates and making the candidates of the time conservative and rigid in their thinking. The Qing Dynasty, which was also characterised by the "Prison of Words" and the "Eight-legged Essay", was even stricter.

5. The significance of the Turning Point in the development of Chinese and Western civilizations for today's Era of globalisation

By formally establishing the Western capitalist system, it not only allowed Western civilisation to spread beyond China but also accelerated the process of globalisation. Needham shows how the capitalist system accelerated the process of globalisation through political and economic changes [10]. With the gradual opening of global shipping routes in the 16th century, the world as a whole began

to be connected. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the emergence of new political systems. Skinner analyses in detail the major political thinkers of the Renaissance and their influence on the modern political system, and he discusses Machiavelli's *The Prince*, in which the concepts of realpolitik and the theory of power politics have had a profound influence on modern state theory. Skinner also examines Jean Bodin's theory of sovereignty, arguing that Bodin's ideas laid the foundations for the modern concept of state sovereignty [11].

In terms of culture, cultural exchanges and intermingling between China and the West deepened. Wang Hui mainly discusses the activities of Catholic missionaries in China in the 17th century, analysing how they influenced Chinese society and culture through religious, educational and cultural exchanges [12]. Matteo Ricci is significant as the first Western missionary to come to China to preach. Chen Jiahe mainly examines the historical background and missionary activities of Matteo Ricci in China, including how he promoted the exchange of Chinese and Western cultures through translation, education, and scientific research, and analyses Matteo Ricci's background, his experiences in China, and his influence on Chinese science, culture, and religion [13]. This not only promoted China's intellectual progress and accelerated the development of science in China at that time, but also brought excellent traditional Chinese culture to the West. In this era of globalisation and informatisation, where information is shared and culture spreads rapidly, the exchange of Chinese and Western ideas and culture plays an important role in China's foreign relations. Such exchanges not only promote mutual understanding and friendly cooperation between countries but also give constant impetus to the process of globalisation. By reviewing the historical twists and turns in the development of Chinese and Western civilisations, it can better understand the deep-rooted dynamics of today's globalisation and the opportunities and challenges it brings.

6. Conclusion

First, at the end of the Middle Ages, European countries gradually developed relatively stable and open states, which provided a solid foundation for economic development and social stability. In contrast, China's political system during the Ming and Qing dynasties was relatively rigid, and the strengthening of centralisation limited local autonomy and innovation. Second, economically, the West developed capitalism and vigorously developed a capitalist market economy through the Industrial Revolution and the opening of new shipping routes that facilitated global trade. At the same time, however, China's government closed its doors to the world and its economic development lagged because it was unable to export goods.

The spread of technology and knowledge played an important role in the development of Western civilisation. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment fostered the scientific revolution and intellectual emancipation, which led to significant advances in science, technology, and knowledge in Europe. The invention and popularisation of the printing press accelerated the spread of knowledge and the development of education. In contrast, despite its early scientific and technological achievements, such as the Four Great Inventions, China's scientific and technological innovation and the dissemination of knowledge were relatively stagnant during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Moreover, the openness of Western thought and culture promoted social progress and diversification, whereas China's "eight-legged scholarship" restricted thinking, and the confinement of Confucianism prevented diversified thinking and failed to inject new vitality into society.

In summary, the turning point between China and the West was a historical necessity and was caused by several factors. Reform of the political system, openness of thought, free trade, and the opening of sea routes all contributed to the overtaking of China by Western civilisation. Understanding this historical process can help to understand the development path of Chinese and Western civilisations, and also provides valuable historical experience and lessons for the development of today's society.

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