

Means and Motives for Overseas Expansion: Europe and China Compared

Source: Sterns, Peter N. "World Civilizations: The Global Experience." p. 510-511

In the early decades of the 14th century, Chinese mariners dramatically demonstrated their capacity to mount large expeditions for overseas exploration and expansion. Because their failures to sustain these initiatives left Asian waters from the Persian Gulf to the China seas open to armed European interventions a century later, the reasons for the Chinese failure to follow up on their remarkable naval achievements merits serious examination. The explanations for the Chinese refusal to commit to overseas expansion can be best understood if they are contrasted with the forces that drove the Europeans with increasing determination into the outside world. In broad terms, such a comparison underscores the fact that although both the Europeans and the Chinese had the means to expand on a global scale, only Europeans had strong motives for doing so.

The social and economic transformations that occurred in European civilization during the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance had brought it to a level of development that compared favorably with China in many areas. Although the Chinese empire was far larger and more populous than tiny nation-states such as Portugal, Spain, Holland, the European kingdoms had grown more efficient at mobilizing their more limited resources. Rivalries between the states of a fragmented Europe had also fostered a greater aggressiveness and sense of competition on the part of the Europeans than the Chinese rulers could even imagine. China's armies were far larger than those of any of the European kingdoms, but European soldiers were on the whole better led, armed, and disciplined. Chinese wet rice agriculture was more productive than European farming, and the Chinese rulers had a far larger population to cultivate fields, build their dikes and bridges, work their mines, and make tools, clothing, and weapons. But on the whole, the technological innovations of the medieval period had given the Europeans an advantage over the Chinese in the animal and machine power they could generate – a capacity that did much to make up for their deficiencies in human power.

Despite their differences, both civilizations had the means for sustained exploration and expansion overseas, although the Chinese were ready to undertake such enterprise a few centuries earlier than the Europeans. As the voyages of Da Gama, Columbus, and Zheng He demonstrated, both civilizations had the shipbuilding and navigational skills and technology needed to tackle such ambitious undertakings. Why, then, were the impressive Zheng He expeditions a dead end, whereas the more modest probes of Columbus and Da Gama were the beginning of a half a millennium of European overseas expansion and global dominance?

The full answer to this question is complex as the societies it asks us to compare. But we can learn a good deal by looking at the groups pushing for expansion within each civilization and the needs that drove them into the outside world. There was widespread support for exploration and overseas expansion in seafaring European nations such as Portugal, Spain, Holland, and England. European rulers financed expeditions they hoped would bring home precious metals and trade goods that could be sold at great profits. Both treasure and profits could be translated into warships and armies that would strengthen these rulers in their incessant wars with European rivals and, in the case of the Iberian kingdoms, with their Muslim adversaries.

European traders looked for much the same benefits from overseas expansion. Rulers and merchants hoped that explorers would find new lands whose climates and soils were suitable for growing crops such as sugar that were high in demand and thus would bring big profits. Leaders of rival branches of the Christian faith believed that overseas expansion would give their missionaries access to unlimited numbers of heathens to be converted or would put them in touch with the legendary lost king, Prester John, who would ally with them in their struggle with the infidel Muslims.

By contrast, the Chinese Zheng He expeditions were very much the project of a single emperor and a favored eunuch, whose Muslim family origins may go a long way toward accounting for his wanderlust. Zheng He appeared to have been driven by little more than curiosity and the vain desire to impress his greatness and that of his empire on peoples whom he considered inferior. Although some Chinese merchants went along for the ride, most felt little need for the voyages. They already traded on favorable terms for all the products Asia, and in some cases Europe and Africa, could offer. The merchants had the option of waiting for other peoples to come to them, or, if they were a bit more ambitious, of going out in their own ships to Southeast Asia.

The scholar-gentry were actively hostile to the Zheng He expeditions. The voyages strengthened the position of the much hated eunuchs, who vied with the scholar-gentry for the emperor's favor and the high posts that went with it. In addition, the scholar-gentry saw the voyages as a foolish waste of resources that the empire could not afford. They believed it would be better to direct the wealth and talents of the empire to building armies and fortifications to keep out the hated Mongols and other nomads. After all, the memory of foreign rule was quite fresh.

As had happened so often before in their history, the Chinese were drawn inward, fixated on internal struggles and the continuing threat from central Asia. Scholar-gentry hostility and the lack of enthusiasm for overseas voyages displayed by Zheng He's successors after his death in 1424 led to their abandonment after 1430. As the Chinese retreated, the Europeans surged outward. It is difficult to exaggerate the magnitude of the consequences for both civilizations and all humankind.

Questions

1. How might history have changed if the Chinese had mounted a serious and sustained effort to project their power overseas in the decades before Da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope?
2. Why did the Chinese fail to foresee the threat that European expansion would pose for the rest of Asia and finally for China itself?
3. Did other civilizations have the capacity for global expansion in this era? What prevented them from launching expeditions similar to those of the Chinese and Europeans?
4. In terms of motivation for overseas expansion, were peoples such as the Muslims, Indians, and Native Americans more like the Europeans or the Chinese?