

# **Rethinking the Rise of the West: The Great Divergence Debate**

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## **I. Introduction**

- a. **Rationale**
- b. **Grade Level and time required**
- c. **Goals**
- d. **Instructional Objectives**
- e. **Resources**
- f. **Procedures**

## **II. Class Activities: Comparing and Contrasting Points of View**

- A. **The Traditional Story of the Rise of the West**
- B. **Rethinking the Rise of the West**
- C. **Historians and Their Perspectives: A Debate**
  - **Primary Sources**
  - **Secondary Sources**

## **III. Web Sources**

## **IV. Bibliography**

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## **Introduction**

### **Rationale**

This unit focuses on historiography. It traces the ways in which historians view the rise of the west during the period from 1450 to 1850. In the past, historians have explained Europe's rise-as expressed in European global dominance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - by focusing on maritime achievements in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This interpretation has also generally viewed Europe's rise as a result of unique European cultural factors.

More recent interpretations, however, have been critical of Western dominance and have attempted to place that dominance in a global historical context. In the 1970s, for example, world systems theory sought to view European dominance as a product of the expansionary nature of capitalism. In the last decade, scholars with opposing views about when, how, and why the West rose have hotly debated new interpretations. Even more recently, new comparative scholarship has sought to locate Europe's rise within a global trade network long dominated by China. Taken as a whole, this recent work within the field of world history has revised the interpretation and meaning of the rise of the West.

## **Grades and Time Required**

Grades 10 -12; Time required: three fifty minute periods

## **Goals**

Students develop:

1. an awareness of the importance of systems of international exchange as factors contributing to the rise of the west
2. an understanding of the logic of the method of historical inquiry by means of a comparison and assessment of the different ways in which historians in the last two centuries have interpreted the dominance of the West in global affairs
3. an appreciation of the issues examined in the debate amongst contemporary scholars who have offered explanations of the great divergence in the development paths of the West and the East

## **Instructional Objectives**

1. Identify the different ways historians have tried to explain the rise of the West.
2. Explain what is meant by the term “world systems theory” and how world systems operate.
3. Compare the basic issues in the debate on the great divergence between East and West which have become the focus of the historical research of the following scholars: David Landes, Andre Gunder Frank, Bin Wong, Kenneth Pomeranz, Peer Vries and Philip C. C. Huang.
4. Identify and explain the kinds of evidence and arguments which are being used by opposing sides in this debate.
5. Trace how historians’ changing views of the rise of the West in the last 25 years illustrate the dynamic nature of the discipline of history.

## **Resources**

- a. Bridging World History (Annenberg/CPB Media), Unit #18  
<http://www.learner.org/courses/worldhistory/>
- b. China and the West, 1500-2000: What is Modern?  
(Asia for Educators)  
<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/chinawh/>

## **Procedure**

1. Announce that the class will embark upon a program of investigation of the reasons which explain the dominance of the West in global affairs in the 19<sup>th</sup> and twentieth centuries.

2. Divide the class into pairs. Each pair undertakes to become familiar with the views of one of the following scholars:
  - a. Immanuel Wallerstein
  - b. David Landes
  - c. Andre Gunder Frank
  - d. Bin Wong
  - e. Kenneth Pomeranz
  - f. Peer Vries
  - g. Philip C. C. Huang

## **CLASS ACTIVITIES: Comparing and Contrasting Points of View**

### **A. The Traditional Story of the Rise of the West**

1. Present to the class the following explanation of the traditional story of the rise of the West:

“The fifteenth to eighteenth centuries saw the rise of the West. Trade routes developed from east to west, most notably in the Indian Ocean. Europeans desired the spices, tea, porcelains, silks, and colorful cotton textiles produced by Asians. In the late fifteenth century, the Portuguese entered this trade directly by rounding the Cape of Good Hope at the southern end of Africa. By the seventeenth century, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, and the English joined directly in the Indian Ocean economy, but the European merchants had no trade goods the Asians wanted. The Spanish-sponsored voyages of Christopher Columbus accidentally provided the solution: silver in the Americas. The Europeans used the profits from their trade with Asia to promote more voyages around the globe. By the eighteenth century, English entrepreneurs used advances in scientific knowledge and engineering to begin an industrial revolution by applying steam power to the machines that produced textiles. Abundant coal in the British Isles and improved transportation that used the same steam engine to power trains aided the British Industrial Revolution. The rhythm of work, now organized by clocks, changed and made the use of human labor more efficient and productive. The British East India Company established trading relationships with individual Indian rulers to the advantage of the Company. By the mid-nineteenth century, the British used their economic and military powers to dominate much of Asia. The British government then was able to help British cotton textiles outsell Indian calicoes in the world market. The British and other Europeans dominated world trade, and Europeans politically controlled many parts of the globe, including Africa, by the end of the nineteenth century.”

*Quote Excerpted from Unit # 18, of the Bridging World History course; see web site [http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit\\_overview\\_18.html](http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit_overview_18.html)*

2. Pose and discuss the following questions:
  - a. Which parts of this explanation are familiar to you?

- b. Is this explanation adequate, objective, sufficient?
  - c. What is missing?
3. Have students watch the first segment of the video Rethinking the Rise of The West which is part of *the Bridging World History course*; see web site [http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit\\_overview\\_18.html](http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit_overview_18.html)

### The Story of the Rise of the West

This video segment explains how historians have traditionally viewed the rise of the West. It documents the story of European intervention in established Eurasian trading networks through their maritime ventures. It highlights how European colonization efforts in the Americas and their growing abilities to sail anywhere in the world both helped establish the first truly global trading network.

Next, it delves into the process of industrialization in Europe, which in the late eighteenth century began to transform Europe's labor systems, productive capacities, and technologies. These changes allowed Europeans to produce ever greater numbers of commodities and-through fossil fuel energy-to create ever more efficient ways of transporting such goods by land and by sea. These abilities, in turn, prompted Europeans to use their goods and technologies to gain strong footholds in global trading networks, and eventually to create their own empires throughout much of the world.

4. Ask students to discuss the following questions:
  - a. As world historians and, thinking outside the box, what other information would you need to offer a complete explanation of the rise of the West?
  - b. What theories of the evolution of human history and of historical change may be of importance in enriching the explanation of the rise of the West?

### **B. Rethinking the Rise of the West**

1. Direct students to the web module:  
[China and Europe, 1500-2000 and Beyond: What is "Modern"?](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/chinawh/web/s6/index.html)  
<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/chinawh/web/s6/index.html>
2. Have the students peruse the sections:  
"Introduction"  
"What Do We Mean by 'Modern'?"  
"Rethinking the Industrial Revolution"
3. Students discuss the following questions:
  - a. How does a Eurocentric interpretation of history distort our understanding of world affairs?

- b. How does a non-European based notion of modernity influence our understanding of global history?
- c. When did the rise of the West occur? If the transition from pre-industrial to an industrial society occurred only 200 years ago, what does it suggest about the future of the global economy?

4. Have students watch the second segment of the video Rethinking the Rise of The West which is part of *the Bridging World History course*; see web site

[http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit\\_overview\\_18.html](http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit_overview_18.html)

### World Systems Critique

Until recently, historians viewed the story of growing European dominance, industrialization, and imperialism as an inevitable part of world history. This segment begins by demonstrating many scholars' long-held belief that the course European history took was "normal," and that all nations, in order to progress, should follow the European model.

This "modernization theory," was increasingly questioned by scholars who lived through the period of European decolonization, when they saw former European colonies reject the European way of life in favor of alternate paths. In the 1960s and 70s, some scholars developed a "world systems theory" that viewed European domination of the world as the result of European capitalism and its capacity to exploit cheap labor and underdeveloped markets in weaker areas of the world.

The ties linking European capitalist areas (the core) with non-European weaker areas (the periphery) were seen as a "world system." Unlike traditional historical views of European global domination, world systems theory is critical of both capitalism and Western expansion.

*The above is an excerpt from Unit # 18, of the Bridging World History course; see web site [http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit\\_overview\\_18.html](http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit_overview_18.html)*

5. Students consider and discuss the following questions:
- a. What is "world system theory?"
  - b. How does world system theory purport to explain the rise of the west?
  - c. How does it differ from the traditional interpretation of the rise of European hegemony?
  - d. To what extent is this theory indebted to the Marxist interpretation of history?

### C. Historians and their Perspectives: A Debate

1. Have students watch the third segment of the video Rethinking the Rise of The West which is part of *the Bridging World History course*; see web site

[http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit\\_overview\\_18.html](http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit_overview_18.html)

2. Students should now work in pairs to familiarize themselves with the primary and secondary sources that follow below.

- Each pair investigates the author whom they have been assigned and the interpretation that this author has offered regarding the reasons for the rise of the West.
- The focus question concerns the reasons for the great divergence in the development paths of Europe and China.

3. Once the investigation is completed, students come together and debate the main issues of the debate with each pair defending the position of the author whom they represent. The debate is won by the pair that presents the most convincing set of arguments

### The "Great Divergence" and Comparative World History

This segment looks at the debates that have arisen in the last twenty-five years about the rise of the West. It begins with the opposing views of two eminent scholars, David Landes (author of *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*) and Andre Gunder Frank (author of *Re-Orient*). Landes argues that European global dominance resulted from inherent cultural characteristics within European society, such as a distinctive work ethic. Frank, on the other hand, argues that European global dominance only became obvious after 1800, and that until then China held the dominant role in the world economy.

The segment then moves to very recent comparative histories that place the rise of the West in an increasingly global context. These works emphasize three factors to contextualize the rise of the West. First, they argue that European dominance could only occur because Europeans were able to take advantage of slave labor and silver mines in the Americas. Europeans could then put the profits to use in global trade networks. Second, they argue that Europeans—especially the British—were able to industrialize early, primarily because they were fortunate enough to have a ready supply of coal deposits near large populations. Finally, the historians argue that the combination of early industrialization with the development of the nation-state and nationalism in Europe produced a particularly powerful expansionary response. Overall, the point of these studies is that European global dominance was not inevitable, and that issues of when, why, and how the West rose are still matters worthy of debate.

*The above is an excerpt from Unit # 18, of the Bridging World History course; see web site [http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit\\_overview\\_18.html](http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit_overview_18.html)*

### Primary and Secondary Sources

#### Primary Sources

**Anand Yang:** " ... I remember in graduate school recoiling when I first read McNeill's *Rise of the West*, but it was really passed off as a world history textbook. It was largely about Europe and Europe's domination of the world. And coming to it as a South Asian

historian, as an Asian historian, I was rather disturbed by an eminent historian passing off the story of Europe as the story of the world. “(Anand Yang, interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting, *Bridging World History*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, October 2003.)

**William McNeill:** “Well, when I wrote *The Rise of the West* I thought in terms of separate civilizations, each with its own sphere of influence. And then interacting, overlapping zones, and movement of ideas back and forth, of technologies back and forth, and skills and organization back and forth. And now I think it’s not untrue, but it seems to be today it’s better to think of the totality of different civilizations lodged within a web—a web of communication and transportation—that means that new experiences, new possibilities, new things can move back and forth perpetually. “(William McNeill, interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting, *Bridging World History*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, February 2004.)

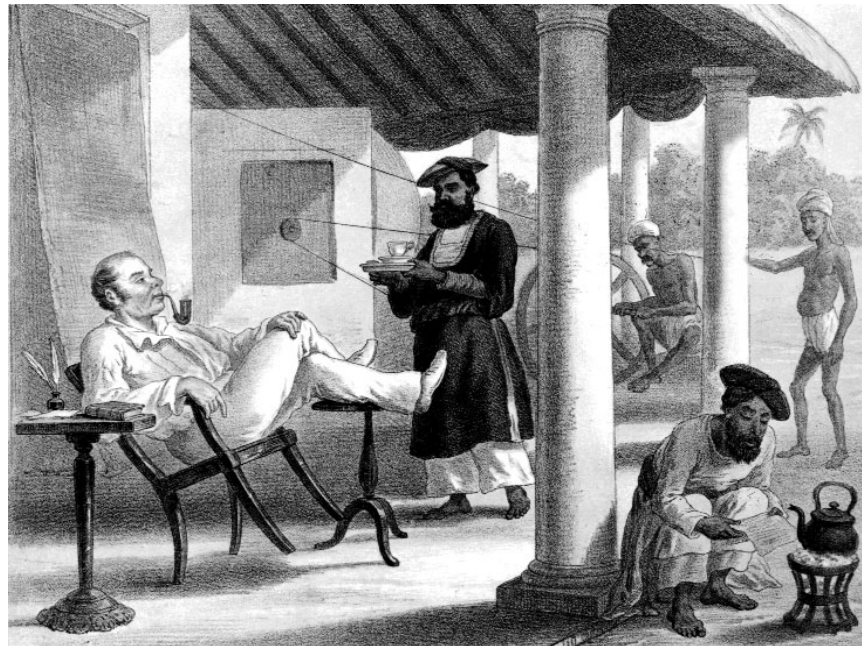
**Adam Smith:** “The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind ... By uniting the most distant parts of the world, by enabling them to relieve one another’s wants, to increase one another’s enjoyments, and to encourage one another’s industry, their general tendency would seem to be beneficial.” (Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* [1776].)

**Karl Marx:** “The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie. The East Indian and Chinese markets, the colonization of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry an impulse never before known, and thereby, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development.” (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848].)

**William McNeill:** “A historian, of course, lives through time himself, and the world changes in the course of a lifetime as long as mine quite drastically—really very drastically so that your awareness, your sensibilities, your expectations, your consciousness will alter if you keep reading and keep listening and keep talking to people across 60 or 80 years very considerably, so that the observer has a platform which is constantly transformed by the very fact that he’s alive. It’s a new world but it’s the same principle: We are communicating with the people around us; the people around us communicate with the people around them. It’s a web that’s been there from the very beginning of humankind, and it’s kept us as one species—it’s kept us as one adventure upon earth. So you’re never the same twice. No day you’re quite the same person. Your sensibilities and what you can see in the world will alter depending on what you’re looking for, and of course history changes as well, so you’re looking back upon a change where these processes were constantly going on. Your sensibilities constantly changed and thus history will always have to be rewritten—always.” (William McNeill, interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting, *Bridging World History*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, February 2004.)

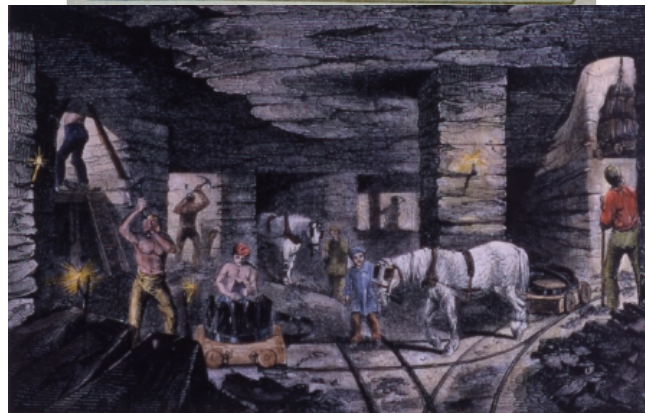


Utagawa Hiroshige, STEAM TRAIN IN YOKOHAMA, JAPAN (1872)



Anonymous, BRITISH RAJ IN INDIA (c. 1800-1900).





Utagawa Hiroshige, COAL MINE, ENGLAND FOREIGNER'S SHIP: STEAMSHIP (1861)

## Secondary Sources

**Modernization Theory:** Scholars developed modernization theory in the 1950s and the 1960s to support the “West is Best” idea. Partially based on the ideas of Karl Marx, sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein developed an explanation for the rise of the West that was based on the concept of a “world system” that emerged with Europe as the core and its colonies as the periphery. World systems theory is a theory developed in the '60s and '70s in the West that attempts to look at the entire world, and it looks at the entire world in terms of the present. The theory tries to explain why the world has become what it has from 1500 onwards, largely in terms of the relentless drive of capitalism to reshape the world. As capitalism develops, so does labor. (“Rethinking the Rise of the West,” *Bridging World History*, VHS, [Portland, OR: Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2004].)

**Summary of Frank's and Landes's Views of the Rise of the West:** These scholars' books, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations* and *Re-Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, both were published in 1998. Landes's view in *Wealth and Poverty of Nations* was that the European nations had particular technical strengths and institutional organizations that enabled them again and again to develop new technologies, to build markets with the goods that they sold, and to expand their influence in the world economy from the period of the first maritime voyages around the world. The book also posits that the other parts of the world had no equivalent contribution to make. Frank's book *Re-Orient* re-emphasizes the role of the Orient in the world economy to argue that the economy of China—and the Qing Empire especially—was growing. It's an attempt to argue a worldwide focus in the economy, and to that degree he emphasizes the silver trade—something where research has recently really showed how from the late sixteenth century a kind of globe-encompassing silver trade tied together all different regions of the world. (“Rethinking the Rise of the West,” *Bridging World History*, VHS, [Portland, OR: Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2004]) and (Pat Manning, interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting, *Bridging World History*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, October 2003.)

**Bin Wong's *China Transformed*** differs substantially from the works of Landes and Frank. Instead of trying to explain fully how the West surpassed China, he compares the political and economic developments of China and Europe over the last 1,000 years. He argues that in the late eighteenth century "China and Europe shared important similarities of preindustrial economic expansion based on Smithian dynamics. These included increased rural industries, more productive agricultures, and expanded commercial networks." The important difference was that western Europe, and especially Britain, had access to large supplies of coal. Britain escaped from the constraints of an economy based on organic material by switching to a coal- and mineral-based economy in the late eighteenth century. Britain then entered into a period of intensive economic growth in the early nineteenth century. Although China and Europe were economically similar until 1800, Bin Wong argues that they were substantially politically different since at least 1000. Europe had competing states. Within each state rulers also competed with elite groups over their claims on the states and the ruler's ability "to extract resources and make war" (281). European rulers developed political and economic policies and institutions that allowed them to maximize their power given their political constraints. In

China, rulers had different political concerns. Because China was a unified, agrarian empire and elites had few institutionalized claims on the state, rulers developed policies and institutions that maintained the existing social order. These political differences contributed to significant differences in both the economic and political trajectories of China and Europe after 1800. (*World History Connected*)

**Kenneth Pomeranz's** *The Great Divergence* attempts to answer the same question about why Europe industrialized before China, but he uses a theoretical approach similar to Bin Wong. Pomeranz is interested in comparing economic developments in Europe and China before 1800, but he does so within a larger world-systems perspective. In Part One, he primarily focuses his comparisons on the core regions of England and the Yangzi River Delta, since these regions were roughly similar in size and development. Pomeranz also includes significant information from other parts of Europe, China, Japan, and even India where it helps to clarify distinctions between the core regions. In terms of their population controls, technological levels, capital accumulation, and functioning Smithian markets, Pomeranz argues that "the most developed parts of western Europe seem to have shared crucial economic featuresÉwith other densely populated core areas in Eurasia." The notable divergence is the presence of large and readily accessible coal deposits in Britain. Pomeranz also argues that Britain and China were roughly equal in terms of their consumption of luxury goods, but European states, and especially Britain, were more aggressive in their tactics of trade. Europe's system of state-sponsored armed trading allowed it to gain control of the Americas and gain a foothold in the Asian trade. Pomeranz also argues that both Britain and parts of China were reaching severe ecological crises in terms of their ability to support growing populations with limited resources. These Malthusian constraints led China to encourage settlements in the peripheries of the empire and emigration to Southeast Asia, and led Britain to colonize the Americas and to use parts of Eastern Europe as source of resources. The different ways that Britain and China exploited peripheries is important for Pomeranz's argument. China's periphery only supplied a limited amount of "breathing room," because eventually the region became densely populated and less dependent on the core regions of China. In the British case, there were far more available resources because disease had wiped out the native populations of the Americas. Europeans in the Americas also set up plantations that only produced sugar, tobacco, and cotton. Plantations needed to import food and basic necessities like clothing, which benefited the British textile industry. The high mortality rate of slaves also ensured a steady demand for them. These conditions generated large and continuous profits for Britons involved in the Atlantic trade. Pomeranz argues that none of these factors alone would have led to British industrialization, but the combined effect of all factors allowed Britain to industrialize first. (*World History Connected*)

“ [Peer De Vries] accepts, though he is not always in full agreement, the following claims: 1) Qing China was not a poor and static society but enjoyed a standard of living that was comparable to Europe's right through the early 1800s; 2) Chinese markets were both "much larger" and "closer to Smith's model of perfect competition than markets in Britain;” 3) China's foreign trade was "immense;” 4) far from being "despotic," the Chinese Qing state was even less intrusive than Britain's: not only was the Chinese army

"comparatively small," but Britain had "more than 30 times as many public servants per head of the population," plus Chinese taxes seem to have been lower ; 5) China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in terms of social mobility, "was just as much, or if you prefer, just as little, an 'open society' as Britain was;" 6) Weber was wrong: Chinese "rationality, work ethos, business acumen, and love of profit" were just as vivid as in Britain; 7) as late as the end of the eighteenth century, "China's agriculture per hectare still was much more productive than Britain's agriculture [...] in terms of productivity per labourer the differences between both countries or their core regions were minimal."

After considering all these points, however, Vries draws the very important, if not always well appreciated, distinction between showing, on the one hand, that China's living standards and overall productivity were comparable to Britain's, and showing, on the other, that China's economy was *moving away* from the Malthusian limitations of the old regime, and was *just as ready* to industrialize . Vries stresses above all else the fact that "somewhere between 1500 and 1700" Britain had become a more dynamic society when it came to making mechanical instruments and when it came to cultivating a scientific culture that would eventually make possible the 'first industrial revolution.' He defines this industrial revolution as a process of continuous technological changes that started in the eighteenth century and would eventually create a new type of economy based on new sources of energy, raw materials, and tools. He contrasts this experience to China's and concludes there was no indication that China was having an industrial revolution, not even in the mid-nineteenth century.

Vries's emphasis on the scientific-practical culture of England—the engineers, craftsmen, and entrepreneurs who specialized in applying the Newtonian science into machines useful for production—is a view also proposed by Margaret Jacob and Joel Mokyr. It is also a view adopted by Goldstone, who otherwise places himself squarely within the 'California School' of Wong, Frank, Lee and Feng, and Pomeranz, and agrees with them that the "great divergence" only begins in the nineteenth century. One may thus ponder at this point what makes Vries different from Goldstone. I think there are substantial differences, despite their additional agreement that New World products and abundant deposits of coal in Britain were not, on their own, the specific factors which led to the great divergence; and indeed despite the fact that Vries even accepts the California-school argument that some agricultural regions of China continued to enjoy, right through the eighteenth century, improvements in labor productivity, rather than just increases in land productivity (output per unit of land). He argues that even in the early 1800s the differences between Chinese and British agricultural productivity were minimal.<sup>6</sup>

If students are going to make rational sense of this sometimes confusing debate, they must learn to draw fine distinctions between the various contending positions. The key remaining difference between Vries and Goldstone (and all of the California-school writers) is that Vries, in my view, does not relegate to historical accident the undeniable divergence in economic prosperity between England and the most advanced regions of China in the nineteenth century. Goldstone thinks that only after about 1830 England began to follow a new path of growth, because only then England saw the widespread application of steam power and self-sustaining increases in agricultural productivity and

per capita income. Before that date both countries were still pre-industrial economies following a similar path of diminishing returns and rising prices. Goldstone is thus unwilling to recognize something new behind the "efflorescence" of eighteenth-century England that could not be found in Qing China. If anything, he thinks China's "efflorescence" was more impressive: look at the "unprecedented" gain of nearly 200 million people between 1700 and 1800, all supported by increases in land and in labor productivity. This was an "extraordinary achievement," which should no longer be neglected, in the way other scholars have done, when they unceremoniously argued that Qing China "merely" experienced "extensive" or "involutionary" growth, which is a type of expansion where increases in total output and population are achieved without innovations and without increases in labor productivity.<sup>7</sup>

**Contingency, Accident, and Conjuncture:** The video also presents the concepts of contingency, accident, and conjuncture as an explanation for the rise of the West. Contingency is that the West's ascendancy was dependent on silver mined in the Americas. Accident was England's abundance of easily mined coal. Conjuncture was the rise of the nation-state and industrialization at the same time in Europe. The rise of the West was not inevitable, but just a lucky accident. ("Rethinking the Rise of the West," *Bridging World History*, VHS, [Portland, OR: Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2004].)

Much as Vries listens to all these points with a curious mind; what places him outside the 'California School,' and inside the 'Eurocentric' group, is his determination to trace the long-term causes of the first industrial revolution within British society, and to explain the long-term factors within traditional China that, from the 1800s onwards, created the indisputable crises of overpopulation, recurrent famines, political breakdown, semi-colonial status, ecological deterioration, and widespread impoverishment so visible by 1850s—all in stark contrast to the British 'miracle.' Vries does not equivocate when he says there were no signs "whatsoever" in China that a major technological breakthrough was on the horizon that would make possible a new type of modern growth. ("World History Connected")

### III. Web Sources:

The above secondary sources are found at the following web sites:

[http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit\\_main\\_18.html](http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit_main_18.html)

(Bridging World History)

<http://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiuc.edu/2.2/duchesne.html>

(World History Connected)

<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/>

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### IV. Bibliography

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Peer Vries. *Via Peking Back to Manchester: Britain, The Industrial Revolution and China* (The Netherlands: Leiden University, CNWS Publications, 2003)

Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Duke University Press, 2004)

### **Other Resources**

For access to primary documents and other resources for this project as well as appropriate activities see *Bridging World History* Unit 18, at [http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit\\_main\\_18.html](http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/unit_main_18.html)

*Asia for Educators: China and Europe – What is Modern?*  
<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/chinawh/>