merchants were formidable agents of conversion. The foundation of a new entrepôt state at Malacca (Islamized by 1425) was the prelude to Islam's rapid spread in maritime South East Asia. Yet perhaps the starkest evidence for Islam's continuing dynamism was the forward movement of Ottoman power in South East Europe. The Ottoman state, the most vigorous of the Turkic principalities in Asia Minor, had crossed the Dardanelles into Europe in the 1350s. Independent Serbia was destroyed at Kosovo in 1389; Bulgaria was in Ottoman hands by 1394. At the Battle of Nicopolis (1396) a pan-European army of would-be crusaders was crushed. Ottoman power was resilient enough to survive defeat at Tamerlane's hands in 1402, and the capture of Constantinople in 1453 marked the consolidation of a new dynastic state militarily more formidable than any the Europeans had so far faced in the East. At the death of Mehmet the Conqueror in 1481, the whole Balkan peninsula south of Belgrade and the Danube estuary was under Ottoman rule. The 'gunpowder age' seemed to be signalling a violent new phase of Islamic expansion.

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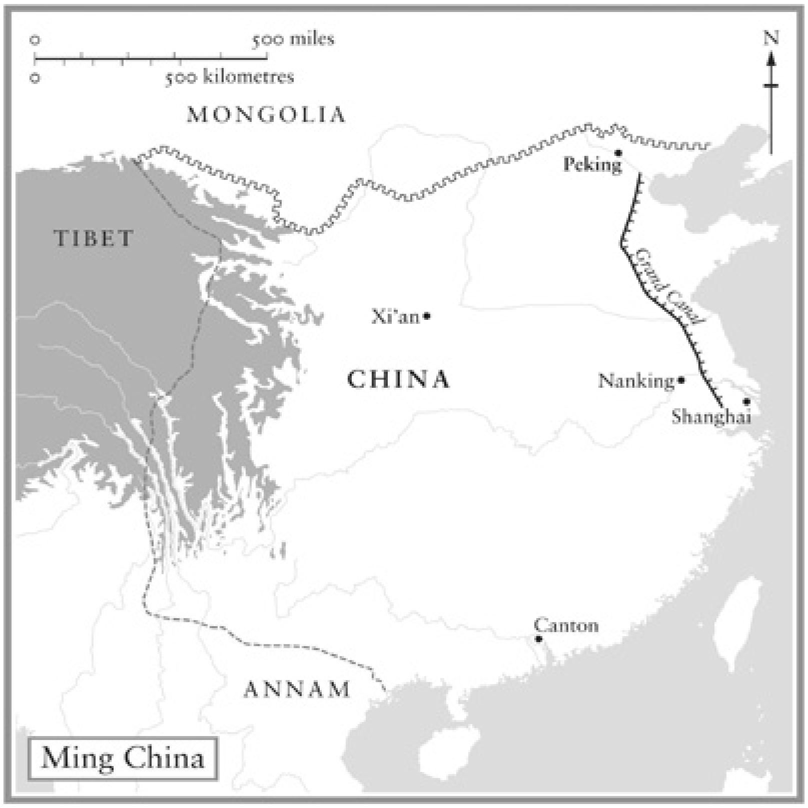
Around 1400, Islamic societies remained the most dynamic and expansionist element in Eurasia. But it was China whose wealth and power were pre-eminent. Despite periodic disruption by dynastic upheaval and external invasion, China displayed a political and cultural cohesion unmatched by Europe or the Islamic world. This cohesion had been severely tested. China, too, had felt the impact of Mongol imperialism. A Mongol dynasty (the Yuan) had imposed its rule for most of the century after 1260. The destructive fallout of the Mongol invasion meant the dislocation of trade, and the effects of disease (the Black Death) may have reduced the population from 100 million to 60 million. The Yuan era can also be seen in a more positive light as continuing the commercial expansion of the previous Sung period, opening China more fully to the trade and culture of Middle Eurasia. And after 1370, under the new Ming dynasty (whose founder was a Han, or native Chinese), the unity of the Chinese world was restored and strengthened.

The crucial ingredient of that unity could be found perhaps in China's social and cultural origins. China had been 'made' by the cumulative expansion of intensive agriculture from its beginnings in the north-west, where fertile, fine-grained loess soils had been exceptionally favourable to close cultivation. A continuous process of agricultural colonization carried this 'Chinese' culture across the plains of North China, and then to the Yangtze valley and into the south. Here the basis of agriculture changed, from the wheat and millet of the drier north to the growing of wet-field rice. This great southward expansion, absorbing new land and people into the Chinese world, was the crucial stage in the 'making' of China. It added the hugely productive rice-growing region (where double and triple cropping was possible) to the agrarian economy. It brought new crops and commodities from the sub-tropical south to stimulate a rise in domestic trade. 'The north in the past', claimed a contemporary writer, 'profited from dates and millet, neither of which southern China has had at any time. Nowadays, the south enjoys abundant profits from perfumes and teas, neither of which has ever existed in the north. The north benefits from its hares, the south from its fish. None of these things has been possessed by both north and south.'[46] The southward expansion also encouraged the relatively rapid emergence between 900 and 1300 of a commercial economy whose geographical regions were physically linked by a network of waterways. With these in place, specialization accelerated (because necessities could be brought from some distance away); an elaborate system of credit grew up; and the use of paper money eased the expansion of business. China assembled the basic components of a market economy earlier, and on a much larger scale, than any other part of Eurasia. It reaped the rewards from inter-regional exchange and the impulse this gave to technical change. Before 1300, a range of innovations in both agriculture and manufacture (cotton-textile weaving was by then well established in the lower Yangtze valley) had been widely adopted, and a culture of invention favoured the diffusion of new techniques.

This remarkable growth path, whose trajectory was quite different from the rest of Eurasia's, shaped China's political as well as economic history. To a much greater extent than anywhere else in Eurasia, the commercial economy that made China so wealthy needed the active support of public authority, mainly to build and maintain the waterways. China's communications, as well as the managing of its fragile environment – dependent on water, threatened by floods – required an unusual degree of bureaucratic liaison between centre, province and district. Secondly, it was brutally clear that without the union of north and south the pattern of regional exchange that drove the commercial economy would function poorly at best. That meant exerting effective control over a much larger land area than any other state in Eurasia was able to rule continuously. Thirdly, it was North China's acquisition of the vast, rich hinterland stretching away to the South China Sea that allowed it to meet its main geopolitical challenge – although not all the time. The Chinese Empire, with its highly evolved agrarian culture, confronted the nomad empires that erupted volcanically in the Inner Asian steppe. Indeed much of North China was dangerously close to the epicentres of nomadic energy – which usually formed where the steppe and the 'sown' came closest together. The primary role of a Chinese emperor was to safeguard the frontier against the nomadic irruptions that threatened to wreck (physically and politically) his complex agrarian world. The resources to pay for this eternal war of attrition against the Inner Asian invader depended heavily on the south's contribution in foodstuffs and trade. Thus,



Ming China

although China, like much of Middle Eurasia, had felt the violent impact of Mongol imperial ambition, the blow had been softened. The steppe invaders had learned very quickly that they had to maintain the apparatus of imperial rule if they hoped to exploit China's agrarian wealth. They had to become 'Sinicized', corroding as they did so the tribal loyalties on which their power had been built. Mobilizing the south against the alien conqueror made it possible to maintain stable, continuous government far more completely than in Middle Eurasia, where Turkic tribes and military slaves were the main beneficiaries of political change.

But China's cohesion was not simply the consequence of commercial and strategic self-interest. It rested upon the achievement of a remark able 'high culture', a classical, literary civilization, whose moral and philosophical outlook derived from Confucian texts. Just as critical, perhaps, to the making of China as the junction of its north and south was the entrenchment of this Confucian learning in a literati elite and their recruitment to form an imperial bureaucracy. Once Confucian scholarship and literary skill (writing the 'three-legged' essay required by the civil-service examiners) became the ticket of entry into imperial service, they enjoyed the devotion of the educated class in every part of China. The adoption by the provincial gentry of literati ideals (and bureaucratic ambitions) was a vital stage in China's transition from a semi-feudal society, where power was wielded by great landholders, into an agrarian empire. What made that possible was an imperial system that relied much less on the coercive power of the imperial centre (a clumsy and costly option in such a large state) than on the *cultural* loyalty of the local elites to an imperial idea with which their own prestige was now closely bound up. As a formula for the exertion of effective power at very long range, it was astonishingly ingenious and astonishingly successful.

It was hardly surprising that the impressive scale of the Chinese state, the wealth of its cities, the skill of its engineers and artisans, the quality of its consumer goods (like silk, tea and porcelain), the sophistication of its art and literature, and the intellectual appeal of its Confucian ideology were widely admired in East and South East Asia. In Korea, Japan and Vietnam (parts of which were ruled as a province of China for over a thousand years until AD 939), China was regarded as the model of cultural achievement and political order. Chinese merchants had also developed an extensive trade, taking their products to South East Asia.[47] The seafaring and navigational skills of Chinese sailors – including the first use of the magnetic compass – were comparable with, if not superior to, those of their Arab or European counterparts.

Around 1400, it might have seemed to any well-informed observer that China's pre-eminence in the Old World was not only secure but likely to grow stronger. Under Ming rule, China's subordination to the Mongols and their imperial ambitions all across Eurasia had been definitively broken. Ming government reinforced the authority of the emperor over his provincial officials. The use of eunuchs at the imperial court was designed to strengthen the emperor against the intrigues of his scholar-gentry advisers (as well as protect the virtue of his concubines). Great efforts were made to improve the agrarian economy and its waterway network. Then, between 1405 and 1431, the emperors dispatched the eunuch admiral Cheng-ho on seven remarkable voyages into the Indian Ocean to assert China's maritime power. Commanding fleets carrying over twenty thousand men, Cheng-ho cruised as far as Jeddah in the Red Sea and the East African coast, and made China's presence felt in Sri Lanka, whose recalcitrant ruler was carried off to Peking. Before the Europeans had gained the navigational know-how needed to find their way into the South Atlantic (and back), China was poised to assert its maritime supremacy in the eastern seas.

This glittering future was not to be. Instead, the early fifteenth century was to show that, while China was still the most powerful state in the world, it had reached the limits of oceanic ambition. There would be no move beyond the sphere of East Asia until the Ch'ing conquered Inner Asia in the mid eighteenth century. The abrupt abandonment of Cheng-ho's maritime ventures in the 1420s (the 1431 voyage was an afterthought) signalled part of the problem. The Ming had driven the Mongols out, but could not erase the threat that they posed. They were forced to devote more and more resources to their northern defence, a geostrategic burden whose visible part was the drive to complete the so-called Great Wall. Turning their back on a maritime future may have been a concession to their gentry officials (who disliked eunuch influence), but it was also a bow to financial constraints and the supreme priority of dynastic survival. The Ming decision reflected, perhaps, a deeper constraint. The Ming dynastic principle was the fierce rejection of the Inner Asian influence that the Mongol Yuan had wielded. It united China against the cultural outsiders. It asserted the exclusiveness of Chinese culture. A 'Greater China' of Han and non-Han peoples was incompatible with the Ming vision of the Confucian monarchy. The grand strategy of indefinite defence carried with it the logic of cultural closure.[48]

There was a further change, whose effects no contemporary observer could have fully grasped. The greatest puzzle in Chinese history is why the extraordinary dynamism that had created the largest and richest commercial economy in the world seemed to dribble away after 1400. China's lead in technical ingenuity and in the social innovations required for a market economy was lost. It was not China that accelerated towards, and through, an industrial revolution, but the West. China's economic trajectory has been furiously debated. But the hypothesis advanced by Mark Elvin more than thirty years ago has yet to be overturned.[49] Elvin stressed the advances achieved by China's 'medieval economic revolution' in the Sung era, but insisted that when China emerged from the economic depression of the early Ming period (a product in part of the great pandemic) a form of technical stagnation had set in. More was produced, more land was cultivated, the population grew. But the impetus behind the technological and organizational innovations of the earlier period had vanished, and was not recovered. China grew quantitatively, not qualitatively. Part of the reason, Elvin argued, was the inward turn we have noticed already: the shrinking of China's external contacts as the Ming abandoned the sea. There was an intellectual shift away from the systematic investigation of the natural world. And it was partly a matter of exhausting the reserves of fresh land, so that less and less was to spare for industrial crops (like cotton) after the needs of subsistence had been met. A subtler influence was also at work. China was a victim of its own success. The very efficiency of its pre-industrial economy discouraged any radical shift in production technique (even in the nineteenth century, the vast web of water routes made railways seem redundant). The local shortages, bottlenecks and blockages that might have driven it forward could be met from the resources of other regions, linked together in China's vast interior market. Pre-industrial China had reached a 'high-level equilibrium', a plateau of economic success. Its misfortune was that there was no incentive to climb any higher: the high-level equilibrium had become a trap.[50]

We should not anticipate too much. It was to be more than three centuries before anyone noticed.