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China vs. Europe : 1500's Maritime expansions

While the achievements of both Chinese and European maritime activities during the 1500's have received recognition on a global scale, their objectives and motivations were, literally, oceans apart. This short essay shall compare these objectives and contrast between Chinese and European cultural frames, and how it translated to their respective needs to take to the seas, so to speak. We will conclude with an alternate history estimation, where the "discovery" of the Americas was conducted by the Chinese Fleet rather than Christopher Columbus.

The geographical contrast. Geography molded China into the "Middle Kingdom", land resources of the kingdom were vast, accompanied by the centrality of its placement, foreign resources naturally flowed into the area (Morillo, 448). China did not possess the reliance of trade networks to maintain the hierarchy, networks brought forth foreign goods into Chinese markets in terms of luxury rather than necessity. On the other hand, resources were limited in the European continent. In terms of products, Europe had little to offer besides wool and weapons. This fueled the need and reliance on foreign trade to provide the necessities to maintain the social structure.

The philosophical contrast. Confucianism constructs the strong framework that supports the Chinese cultural pyramid. The meritocratic exam system provided means for social mobility,

Although merchants did not belong to the upper echelons of society, they were able to educate their descendants which in turn could move up the social order by participating in the Confucian exam system. This allowed merchants to rise to the gentry class of society. European merchants on the other hand fell out of the so-called “Three Orders”, not belonging to those who prayed (religious elite), those who fought (militaristic elite) nor those who worked (peasants). Hence, they were simply ignored (Morillo, 448-449).

Furthermore, European religion and militaristic nature encouraged colonialism, the new worlds brought “Gold and Christians” back to Europe. The situation and mentality eventually drove Europeans to colonize even the trade networks. Geographical and Philosophical motivations discouraged colonization in China. Simply put, it did not have the need for it. The centrality of the self-sufficient nation accompanied by Confucian philosophy created the pacifist projection of power that translated to Zhang He’s treasure fleet.

Given its nature, there are at least 2 monumental ways that history would be different if in any case it was Zhang He who was the first to land on the American east coast. The European dominance of maritime trade as we know it would not have existed, in turn would change the course of History that developed around the trading networks leading up to the industrial revolution. European kingdoms would still be caught in the vicious cycle of violence amongst themselves. The so-called “Dark Age” would truly be dark, without maritime connections the Renaissance would probably arrive much later in history.

Culturally speaking, Buddhism and Confucianism, rather than Christianity would dominate later American cultural frames, albeit at a far less aggressive rate, similar to how these

same values slowly infiltrated into Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese and South East Asian frames. Slowly but surely, Temples and schools would dominate American towns instead of Churches.

On a lesser scale, the Emperor's estate would have a very different, less exotic to some extent, Zoo. Instead of Rhinos and Giraffe, Lamas, Alpacas, Mountain Lions and Jaguars would be appreciated by the Chinese royalty. Unfortunately, I believe the fate of the native americans would more or less remain the same, since their "achilles heel" is there lack of immunity to diseases, something which China has not ceased to repeatedly exported.

In conclusion, Chinese never found the need to colonize, the pacifist nature of their cultural frame would project itself on a global scale if they were those who initially dominated maritime trade. Monumental shifts in history would occur, both in terms of internal European struggle and religious nature of the "New worlds".

Works Cited

Morillo, Stephen. *Frameworks of World History*. New York City, Oxford UP, 2014.