Notes on Paul Kennedy’s “The Rise of the Western World”

Introduction:
• The year 1500 is considered the date that marks “the divide between modern and premodern times.” (3)
• It was not obvious to those living in Europe that their country would “dominate much of the rest of the earth.” (3)
• “Europe’s relative weaknesses were more apparent than its strengths.” (3)
  o Europe was not the most fertile or populated land in the world, and it was geopolitically awkward, as well as suspect to frequent land invasion from the east and the south.
• Following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Turks continued their advance and “had taken Greece and the Ionian Islands, Bosnia, Albania, and much of the rest of the Balkans” by the end of the century. (3)
• “There was never a united Europe in which all parts acknowledged one secular or religious leader. Instead, Europe was a hodgepodge of petty kingdoms and principalities, marcher lordships and city-states.” (4)
  o Powerful monarchies existed in Spain, France, and England, but all regarded the others as “rivals, rather than allies in the struggle against Islam.” (4)
• Europe held no “pronounced advantages in the realms of culture, mathematics, engineering, or navigational and other technologies” compared to Asia. (4)
  o Most of Europe’s culture and science was also borrowed from Islam.
• “Europe was accelerating both commercially and technologically by the late fifteenth century” but so was every other great nation in the world at the time. (4)
  o However this does imply that Europe in 1500 was one of the most important cultural power centers.” (4)
  ▪ Yet it wasn’t clear that Europe was emerge at the top of great nations as time went on.
• To understand the causes of Europe’s rise, it is necessary to examine the strengths and weaknesses of other nations at the time.

Ming China:
• China was the most superior civilization of premodern times.
  o It had a population of 100-130 million in the 15th century, compared to Europe’s 50-55 million.
  o It had a remarkable culture, fertile and irrigated plains, canal systems, and a “unified, hierarchic administration run by a well-educated Confucian bureaucracy” which had given a “coherence and sophistication to Chinese society.” (4)
• China was repeatedly invaded, however it “had a habit of changing its conquerors much more than it was changed by them.” (6)
• The Ming dynasty emerged in 1368, which reunited the empire and finally defeated the Mongols.
• “The most striking feature of Chinese civilization must be its technological precocity.” (6)
  o The Chinese had large libraries, movable printers (which were developed in the 11th century), sophisticated trade and industry, large cities, extensive trade routes, paper money, and an enormous iron industry that produced more iron than Britain did during the Industrial Revolution.
• The Chinese turned to overseas exploration and trade; they also invented the magnetic compass, and “commerce with the Indies and the Pacific Islands was potentially as profitable as that along the caravan routes.” (6)