Students of Chinese history of the past 3,000 years are always taught what a brilliant farming civilisation China became and from very early on. That said, however, China occasionally infiltrated rather unexpectedly into other areas of interest outside agriculture and sericulture and sometimes left permanent marks. Such behaviour has aroused the imagination of historians. China was exceptional amongst ‘ordinary farming cultures’ which did not have the luxury of stretching beyond crops and fields.

In this context, it is not that surprising for scholars like Joseph Needham to devote time and energy to the study of science and technology in traditional China to see how far the ancient Chinese went outside their farming existence. Indeed, the Ming cross-ocean voyages under Admiral Zheng He (or Cheng Ho, 1371–1433) has remained one of the most fascinating cases for the “Needham’s Puzzle” of why and how the Chinese developed the vision and taste which were clearly superior to any contemporary civilisations and why and how Chinese supremacy did not in the end lead China anywhere. The spirit of Needham’s Puzzle is the fundamentally counterfactual logic that either Chinese supremacy should have not been created or, if it was created, it should have continued and not stopped. That mindset has resulted in disproportionate attention to Zheng He’s achievements. Such achievements, unprecedented at that time in the history of the world, have been seen as the closest things to the later deeds of Columbus and Vasco da Gama who laid the ground for European sea power which in turn changed the world. The most recent nostalgia was the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics when Chinese performers recreated the scene of ocean-going Ming junks touring Asian waters. Sadly, Zheng He did not even change China that much.

The debate so far has been why a leader was unable to maintain her position in the world and why the global colonisers were not the cocky pioneers of the Chinese under Zheng He but late-coming humble
Europeans led by sailors under the flags of Iberian kingdoms. The traditional answer to that paradox has been different mindsets, institutions and resource endowments which differentiated China from Europe very early on. The revisionist view, commonly associated with the “California School,” however emphasises the similarities of the two civilisation blocs, China and western Europe, in history. Kenneth Pomeranz’s Great Divergence Thesis that Smithian growth was the norm prior to the British Industrial Revolution across Eurasia captures that spirit. The message is that China was normal and Europe was an economic freak. This is plausible outside maritime history. Once shipping is introduced in the debate then the Ming norm becomes strange, a one-off event and hence a freak while the European norm was to keep building up capacity through Smithian growth or otherwise until over-running all other civilisations. The natural question is why the Ming Chinese stopped their Smithian growth in sailing. To deal with the question the logical step is to go back to Square One and explore the capabilities of Chinese shipping and the background for the choices made by Chinese and European sailors and their superiors.

An easy way out of the apparent dilemma is to justify the Ming Chinese decision not to pursue expansion of shipping and settlement overseas in light of an alleged cultural arrogance, as if the only land worth their while was the East Asian Mainland. If that was the reason they always returned home after adventures then by extension Europeans’ colonial success came from their deep-seated cultural humility which meant they tended to settle wherever they sailed. However, Chinese did settle outside China. So far there are around 30 million overseas Chinese and if the Chinese who live in Taiwan and Hong Kong are included, the number is 60 million. So, Chinese travellers did stop going home at some point. In the end, the argument is inevitably a circular one: the Chinese stopped because they stopped. To avoid that trap is to examine China’s track record of maritime development to see if there was any pattern that could have logically led to Zheng He’s voyages and that could have sustained such voyages of exploration.

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1 See e.g. Jones, *The European Miracle*; Mokyr, *The Lever of Riches*; Needham, *Science and civilisation in China*, vol. 7; Hutton, *Writing on the Wall*.