"The direction of the wind in the world has changed," Mao Zedong claimed in the 1950s. "At present," it is "the east wind that prevails over the west."

Mao was premature and, it appears, prescient. These days, with its goods filling 90 percent of the shelf space at Walmart, China is the workshop to the world. Its trade surplus with the United States has ballooned to more than $200 billion. And its growth rate during the worldwide recession of 2009 was a stunning 7.5 percent.

Like many of us, Ian Morris, a professor of classics and history at Stanford University, wonders whether we've reached the beginning of the end of Western dominance.

In his new book, he risks the wrath of specialists as he draws on archaeology, ancient history, sociology and neuroscience in a stunningly informative, imaginative and engaging account, spanning 50,000 years of the "social development" of the West and East -- and what the future might hold.

Mr. Morris rejects the theories that Western hegemony was "locked in" in the distant past -- and that Europeans were culturally superior to everyone else. For centuries, he demonstrates, China was more advanced than Western Europe.

Geography provides the best explanation of regional differences, the author maintains. People in the Middle East were the first to become farmers and settle in villages around 9,000 B.C., because they lived among the densest concentration of domesticable plants and animals.

Easterners could have discovered America in the 15th century but they had a lot more to gain by sailing "toward the riches of the Indian Ocean." And an abundance of coal gave England a leg up on the Industrial Revolution.

"Why the West Rules" is nothing if not provocative. It's intellectually stimulating, even when it's not entirely persuasive. Each age "gets the thought it needs," Mr. Morris proclaims, hyperbolically. Although culture, free will, individual achievement (and failure) have acted as wild cards, he insists, they have never trumped biology, sociology and geography for long.

In the 21st century, Mr. Morris speculates that genetic mapping, robotics and artificial intelligence may well push social development "so high that geography will cease to mean anything at all."

The world, he speculates, will either experience a transformation so profound as to resolve our current problems, or stagger into a "Nightfall" precipitated by nuclear war or global warming:

"It's hard to see how any intermediate outcome, in which everyone gets a bit richer, China gradually overtakes the West, and things otherwise go on as much as before, can work."
This apocalyptic sci-fi inflected prediction is puzzling. After all, Mr. Morris has shown, brilliantly and in vivid detail, that history is not "just one damned thing after another" but "the same old same old, a single grand and relentless process of adaptation to the world that always generates new problems that call for further adaptations."

And he's persuaded at least one reader that history can explain the differences that divide humanity and help "prevent them from destroying us."

Book editor Bob Hoover is on assignment this week.

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