"One need not be obsessed with the merits of the Chinese," the French philosopher Voltaire wrote in 1764, to recognize "that their empire is in truth the best that the world has ever seen."

He was mistaken. By the 18th century, China, which had had a legitimate claim to be the most advanced civilization on Earth in 1500, was standing still. By contrast, Niall Ferguson reminds us, the nation-states of Western Europe were well on their way to a "half millennium of almost unstoppable expansion."

In "Civilization," Ferguson joins a long list of writers and scholars who have tried to explain the West's rise to global dominance - and its (perhaps imminent) fall. He brings impressive credentials to the task. An internationally renowned scholar, Ferguson is a professor of history and business administration at Harvard, a senior research fellow of Jesus College, Oxford University, and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, at Stanford. He is the author of nine books, including "The Ascent of Money" and "Colossus."

Eschewing explanations related to geography and natural resources, Ferguson attributes the ascendancy of the West to "six killer applications": competition in politics and economics among Europe's countries; the Scientific Revolution; protection of private property through the rule of law enforced by a representative government; improvements in health and life expectancy; a culture that encouraged consumption; and a faith-based work ethic, which produced behavior and a moral framework conducive to a dynamic but cohesive society.

Ferguson's tone is breezy and brash. He has a knack for the apt aphorism. World War II, he writes, was won "by a combination of British intelligence, Soviet manpower and American capital." And he has stuffed "Civilization" with interesting information. Along with the Code Napoleon, Ferguson indicates, the French invented - and exported - canned food to their colonies. A century later, he observes, the West's "two great economic leaps forward," the Industrial Revolution and the consumer society, were in no small measure about clothing: "making them more efficiently, and then wearing them more revealingly."

Often provocative, Ferguson is not always persuasive. Because it had a political and economic system better suited to absorbing millions of casualties and producing sophisticated weaponry, he claims, the
Soviet Union would "very likely" have prevailed if the Cold War had become hot.

More important, given the thesis of his book, he asserts, hyperbolically, that Westerners have lost confidence in foundational elements of their civilization, turning against religion (or making it into just "another leisure pursuit"); forgetting the benefits conferred on the world by imperialism; and acquiescing in the frequent violations of property rights "by governments that seem to have an insatiable appetite for taxing our incomes and our wealth and wasting a large proportion of the proceeds."

Along with so many others, Ferguson isn't betting against China as the next global hegemon. In just 26 years, he points out, China's gross domestic product has grown by a factor of 10. Putting the lie to the view that it is merely an assembly line for products designed elsewhere, China is poised to lead the world as a manufacturer of wind turbines and photovoltaic panels, is second only to the United States in its annual output of scientific papers and supercomputing capacity, and is building an impressive higher-education infrastructure. China's leaders, moreover, have a plan to reduce their nation’s U.S. dollar reserves and their trade surplus, while stimulating domestic consumption.

Ferguson acknowledges that China may not make it to the top. It might be rent by political unrest. Several scenarios seem plausible. Inequality, Ferguson notes, has risen sharply in the past three decades. About 150 million Chinese citizens - almost 10 percent of the population - subsist on the equivalent of $1.50 a day. A rising urban middle class could use social media to challenge the regime. China's changing demography - thanks to the one-child policy implemented in 1979, more than 16 percent of its people will be over 65 in 2030, triple the percentage in 1980 - could be a ticking time bomb. And gender imbalances, approaching 40 percent more males than females in some provinces, are yet another source of instability.

China's failure to adopt the six "killer apps" as a package, Ferguson implies, could come back to haunt it. The Chinese now have key components of capitalism - and are able to download scientific knowledge. But they continue to reject the rule of law and truly representative government. For this reason, though he worries, with reason, about the "pusillanimity" and historical ignorance of his fellow citizens, Ferguson retains a shard or two of hope for the future of Western civilization.

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