Chapter 3C: The Roman and Chinese Empires:

A Comparison (circa 200 BCE - 200 CE)
While Greeks and Persians collided, the Roman empire on the far western side of Eurasia was emerging; China’s was emerging on the far eastern end.

About 1.5 million square miles each.

Shaped close to half the world’s population at the time.

Dimly aware on another.

Almost no direct contact, but have interesting similarities and differences.
Rome: From City-State to Empire

- Rome began as a small, impoverished city-state on the west side of central Italy, circa, 1700 BCE.
- It is steeped in mythology.
- Legend: https://youtu.be/jToagTve4hs
- Legend: to populate its territory, Romans kidnapped women from neighboring settlements.
- It was originally ruled by a king, around 509 BCE, aristocrats overthrew the monarch and established a republic.
- Men of the wealthy class dominated (patricians)
- Authority = two consuls advised by a Senate.
Changes in Roman Politics

- Plebeians (poorer classes) would demand change and representation.
- They had a written code of law for protections against abuses.
- There was a public assembly to give lower classes a say.
- A new office tribune representing the plebeians allowed the blockage of unfavorable legislation.
- Romans took great pride in this new political system.
- It was backed by the rule of law, the rights of citizens, absence of pretension, upright moral behavior, and keeping one’s word - THAT is what made a model Roman citizen.
Expansion of the Empire (490 - 100 BCE)

- There was about 500 years of expansion made possible with the aforementioned political model.
- Between 264-164 BCE, were the Punic Wars that won Carthage in North Africa, extended Roman control of most of the Italian Peninsula, over the western Mediterranean, including Spain, and made Rome a formidable naval power.
- Later, the eastern Mediterranean, with Greece, Egypt, and Mesopotamia, Southern and Western Europe, including modern-day France and Britain were added to the empire.
- By the early 100s, CE, the empire of Rome had reached its maximum extent.
- Rome is traditionally considered European, but with ties to Africa and Asia. *The richest areas were in the east.
Why Such Fervent Expansion?

- At the heart of it, it was **defensive**. The addition of new territories required new vulnerabilities on the frontier, assuaged only by new conquests.
- Poor soldiers hoped to acquire new land, loot, or wages that improve their stations.
- The wealthy or well-connected often won great acclaim and high political offices, great estates, promotions, etc.
- The wealth of long-established societies were attractive to the thriving empire.
- The less-developed regions of western Europe acted as a food basket.
- A strong army made this possible.
Constant War and Impact on Society

- A masculine warrior culture emphasized gender roles.
- Wealthy warrior/property owners were elite.
- In private life, this translated into total control over women and children, and slaves. (This includes the theoretical right to kill them with no interference of the state.)
- Women could participate in this warrior society by bearing strong, brave sons, helping instill these values into her children.
- This would change at the turn of the millennium (Common Era), when the authority of the imperial state would change the political landscape yet again.
The Legacy of Greco-Roman Civ

- I was an extension of Greek culture.
- This is shown in paintings, murals, frescoes, painted directly on the walls, some remain in Pompeii.
- POMPEII FILM CLIP HERE
- They borrowed from the Greeks: Stoicism - encouraged virtue, duty, moderation, and endurance. *Marcus Aurelius - “In the midst of it all, you must take your stand, good-temperedly and without disdain.”
- Virgil wrote the Aenid - praise of Rome and Roman virtues, modelled after the writings of Homer. “Romans, never forget that you government is your medium! Be this your art: - to practice men in habit of peace, generosity to the conquered, and firmness against aggressors.”
- Ovid: light, witty poetry.
- Tacitus: historian recorded the good and bad of Roman society.
The Legacy of Rome

- Latin was their language which contributed to the Romance languages later.
- Architecture: the Colosseum.
- Aqueducts
- Systems of law: e.g.) equal treatment under the law, innocent until proven guilty, and more.
A Changing Republic

- During the first two centuries into the common era, imperial wealth, the authority of the state, and the breakdown of older Roman social patterns aligned to help people gain more autonomy.
- Roman women had never been as relegated to the home as Greek women had.
- The state intruded into private life.
- The leader of the household, *pater familias*, no longer had power of the life or death of his family.
- Women could marry without giving legal authority to husbands.
- More economical authority (growing commercial nature of the empire.)
- Rules did not apply to slaves.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPf27gAup9U
The End of the Republic

- It was extreme difficulty providing administration to such a vast empire.
- A power imbalance ensued: the very rich vs. increasingly poor farmers being forced into poverty in the cities.
- Elite group of military leaders like Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Julius Caesar had fierce rivalries that resulted in a civil war, (1st century BCE)
- A decline of traditional Roman values, e.g.) simplicity, service, free farmers as society’s backbone of the army, the authority of the Senate hurt society.
- The rise of self-seeking ambition challenged the old order. (newly rich and powerful.)
- Civil war ended, now there was an emperor in place: (Octavian, later granted title of Augustus.)
- He claimed divine right.
- Republic history repeated itself - it was now an empire under an emperor once again.
The Empire under an Emperor

- It was a republic in name only; Augustus kept up the forms, e.g.) the Senate, public assemblies, referred to himself as the “first man” instead of “king” or “emperor”.
- Rhetoric: “power of the Roman people”
- His sole authority was backed up by his professional army.
- This empire in disguise proved to keep peace, security, grandeur, and relative prosperity for the Mediterranean world for about 200 years.
- *Pax Romana:*

  "Everywhere you have made citizens all those who are the more accomplished, noble and powerful people, even if they retain their native affinities....No envy walks in your empire....There has arisen a single harmonious government which has embraced all men....And the whole inhabited world, as it were attending a national festival, has laid aside....the carrying of weapons....Now it is possible for both Greek and barbarian to travel easily wherever he wishes," (Aelius Aristides, Greek subject of the Roman empire, 155 CE, Strayer, et. al, 121).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFbXqSoXznU
China: From Warring States to Empire, 200s BCE

- As opposed to Rome, not creating something new, instead...restoring something old.
- China = remnant of First Civilizations (Xia, Shang, and Zhou.)
- By 500 BCE, the Chinese state in shambles.
- Unity replaced by: “age of warring states”.
- Seven competing kingdoms.
- Qin Dynasty, effective bureaucracy, subordinated its aristocracy, equipped army with iron weapons.
- Great agricultural output and growing population.
- Legalism = social order.
A Brutal, Swift Forge Forward

- Shihuangdi’s empire building was military-driven and brutal.
- Scholars who opposed him were executed, their books burned.
- Aristocrats who opposed him were moved to the capital to be surveilled.
- Recruited hundreds of thousands of laborers to build the Great Wall of China to keep “barbarians” out, worked under brutal conditions, many died.
- Not very popular, his dynasty died with him.
- Heavy taxes
- Uniform system of weights, measures, and currency, standardized length of axles for carts, and the written form of the Chinese language
Legacy of the Chinese Empire Under Qin Dynasty

- Domestic repercussion of the Chinese empire were not as profound as that as the Roman empire.

- Shihuangdi brutality ensured his own Qin dynasty did not last long, collapsing around 206 BCE.

- The Han Dynasty that followed continued the centralized features of Shihuangdi’s design, but moderated the harsh nature of its policies.

- Replaced Legalism with milder, morally-grounded Confucianism.

- Han Dynasty's set the precedent for Chinese political patterns that lasted until the 20th century.

"If I am walking with two other men, each of them will serve as my teacher. I will pick out the good points of the one and imitate them, and the bad points of the other and correct them in myself."

Confucius
Consolidating the Roman and Chinese Empires

Rome
~“Almost the entire world”
~Invested heavily in public works (to integrate domains militarily and commercially.)
~Used religion to bolster power of current emperors. (By 1st century CE, regarded deceased emperors as gods.)
~Absorbed foreign religious traditions (Christianity) to prop up the empire with a common religion.
~More apt to see subjects of its empire as foreigners rather than Romans.

China
~“All under heaven”
~Invested heavily in public works (to integrate domains militarily and commercially.)
~Used religion to bolster power of current emperors. (Mandate of Heaven.)
~Absorbed foreign religious traditions (Buddhism from Indian travelers) to stabilize a society that felt bewildered at the collapse of the Han Dynasty (220) CE.
~More apt to absorb subjects of its empire as Chinese citizens.
Consolidating Culture in the Roman and Chinese Empires

**Rome**
- Western territories found Roman culture alluring and adopted it readily, e.g.) urban life, architecture, language.
- Latin paved the way for Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, and Romanian, distinct cultures arose.
- Romans continued to hold Greek culture in high regard, e.g. literature, philosophy, and art.
- Non-Roman traditions like the cult of the Persian god Mithra, the compassionate Egyptian goddess, Isis, and Christianity spread throughout the empire.

**China**
- Only Buddhism stayed as a cultural shift.
- Chinese characters represented ideas more than sounds, and did not transferable easily to other languages.
- A common language fostered a vast, common culture.
Consolidating Politics in the Roman and Chinese empires

Rome
~Weaker bureaucracy to hold empire together. (Depended on regional aristocratic elites and the army to provide cohesion.)
~Developed an elaborate body of law, applicable equally to all people of the realm, dealing with matters of justice, property, commerce, and family life.
~Good laws important.

China
~Stronger bureaucracy to hold empire together. (Wudi had established an imperial academy for training officials for a bureaucracy with a curriculum of writings based on Confucius.) This became a civil service system based on merit, lasting until the 20th century.
~Good men important.
The Collapse of Empires

**Rome**
- Centuries’ long descent, ending in 476 BCE
- Really only ended in the west, in the East, the Byzantine Empire maintained tradition of imperial Rome for another 1000 years.
- Got too big, overextended, and too expensive.
- No technological breakthrough available to enlarge resources.
- The growth of large landowning families with enormous estates and political clout = avoidance of tax paying, turning free peasants into poor tenant farmers, weakening the government’s authority.

**China**
- Han Dynasty ended in 220 CE, much quicker descent than Rome.
- Got too big, overextended, and too expensive.
- No technological breakthrough available to enlarge resources.
- The growth of large landowning families with enormous estates and political clout = avoidance of tax paying, turning free peasants into poor tenant farmers, weakening the government’s authority.
- 184 CE, the Yellow River Rebellion.
Rivalries and Environmental Factors of Decline

Rome
- Rivalry among elite factions eroded imperial authority.
- Between 235 and 284 CE, 26 men claimed the title of Roman emperor, only one died of natural causes.
- Epidemics decimated the population, Rome declined by 25% by 250 CE. = less production, less revenue for the state, and fewer men to join the army and defend empire’s vast frontiers.
- Climate fluctuations led to drought in 3rd century, wet conditions in the 4th, and more rain and cooler temps in the 5th. (More so in Rome than in China.)

China
- Rivalry among elite factions eroded imperial authority.
- Tension between castrated court officials (eunuchs) loyal to the emperor and Confucian-educated scholar-bureaucrats weakened the state.
- Between 235 and 284 CE, 26 men claimed the title of Roman emperor, only one died of natural causes.
- Epidemics decimated the population = less production, less revenue for the state, and fewer men to join the army and defend empire’s vast frontiers.
- Some climate fluctuations led to drought in 3rd century, wet conditions in the 4th, and more rain and cooler temps in the 5th.
Outside Threats to Empires

Rome
~ Germanic-speaking peoples on the northern frontier in the 4th century CE, setting up their own kingdoms.
~ Some were mercenaries, others refugees fleeing the Huns, penetrating Europe from central Asia.
~ By 476 CE, Germanic kings had replaced Roman leaders entirely.
~ Formed their own ethnic identities: Visigoths, Franks, Anglo-saxons, & others.
~ Drew on Roman law and adopted Christianity.
~ Decline of Urban life, decreased population, less cultivation, diminishing international trade, insecurity for ordinary people.

“Civilization unravelling”

China
~ Had build the Great Wall, offered trading opportunities, offered tribute, created marriage alliances, and waged war to keep marauders out.
~ But as Han Dynasty weakened in the 2nd & 3rd centuries CE, invaders had a better chance at breaching frontier defense, setting up “barbarian states in the north of China eventually, assimilating and becoming Chinese themselves.
~ Decline of Urban life, decreased population, less cultivation, diminishing international trade, insecurity for ordinary people.

“Civilization unravelling”

Attila the Hun
Major Differences in the Collapse of Rome and China’s Empires

Rome
~ No large-scale, centralized imperial authority encompassing all of Western Europe has ever successfully been re-established for any length of time.
~ The memory of unity remained and many tried to recreate it.
~ Most of Europe fragmented into decentralized political systems involving feudal systems with kings with little authority, various city-states in Italy, and small territories ruled by princes, bishops, or the pope. *No more encompassing imperial state.

China
~ About 350 years of disunion, disorder, frequent warfare, and political chaos.
~ 589-618 CE, Sui Dynasty emerged, followed by the Tang (618-907 BCE), and the Song, (960-1279 BCE.)
~ Similar to Han Dynasties: single emperor, bureaucracy with examinations, and Confucian ideas within the political system.
~ Model continued to the 20th century.
## So Why Did the Chinese Persevere?

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<tr>
<th>China</th>
<th>Rome</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Stronger bureaucracy</td>
<td>• Vast language and cultural differences</td>
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<td>• More cohesive ethnic identity</td>
<td>• Roman Catholic Church was frequently</td>
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<td>• Secular Confucian ideas; political matter in the here and now</td>
<td>fighting with state authorities</td>
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<td>• Agriculture more productive than in Europe</td>
<td>• Church fixation on the supernatural and salvation did not help facilitate large empires</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Metallurgy more advanced</td>
<td>• Weaker agriculture</td>
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<td>• More resources to work with in general</td>
<td>• Less resources to work with in general</td>
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**Hero, film about China**

Film to wrap up Greco-Roman era:

**Agora**