Professor's book touches on complicated social development, geography

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A small, flat-faced, yapping dog named Looty has a big story behind him. And it goes back centuries.

For most Westerners, the story starts in 1842, when a small British squadron blasted China's war junks in the Yangzi River and threatened Beijing with starvation by siege. The Manchu delegation, representing a society in chaos since the Opium Wars, signed a humiliating treaty opening China to trade and missionaries.

After the sacking and destruction of Beijing's summer palace in 1860, the Chinese empress' Pekingese - the appropriately named Looty - was whisked to the royal family at Balmoral, bringing the previously unknown breed to the West.

But why Looty to Balmoral, instead of the other way around, with Queen Victoria's beloved Skye terrier, Islay, going to the emperor in Beijing? Why was it the British, and not the Chinese, who dominated?

Stanford Classics and History Professor Ian Morris puts forth some bold answers in his ambitious new 750-page book, *Why the West Rules - For Now* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). And that places Looty in a longer story going back to the last ice age.

Morris' book argues that history is a slow, complicated tango between geography and social development.

Morris suggests that conventional wisdom doesn't always match the facts: Was the West always the foremost naval power? In the 15th century, Columbus' ships were downright primitive compared with China's. In 1492, Columbus sailed with 90 men in three ships. When Zheng sailed for Sri Lanka 87 years earlier, he had nearly 300 vessels, with 27,000 sailors, including 180 doctors and pharmacists.

"Zheng had magnetic compasses and knew enough about the Indian Ocean to fill a 21-foot-long sea chart; Columbus rarely knew where he was, let alone where he was going," Morris wrote. Moreover, Chinese sailors knew the coasts of India, Arabia, East Africa and possibly Australia.

So why didn't China conquer the New World? Why did Europe? The deciding factor was not racial superiority, free political systems, great men or ingenuity - rather, it began with an abundance of domesticable plants and animals at the end of the last ice age. These circumstances made foragers into farmers, and then city-dwellers, creating agriculture, communities and civilization.

In Morris' words, destiny is written in geography - "maps, not chaps, sent the little dog Looty to Balmoral."

Morris, who is also an archaeologist, contends that the experts who have written about these questions usually focus on the last few centuries. To find answers, he began looking at the whole sweep of the past.

He contends that the world's great civilizations radiated outward from two distinct central cores - most importantly, the region known as "Hilly Flanks" in western Eurasia and the region between the Yellow and Yangzi rivers in China. Hence, he homed in on East-West comparisons.

While other civilizations developed away from these two epicenters (in

Central America, for example, or in the Indus Valley), by and large the concentrations of plants and animals were not as dense and varied, so "it takes longer for things to get started in these other regions, and they move more slowly."

That's why Looty didn't go to Cuzco, Delhi or New Guinea.

Geography is only one half the dance, however. Morris' argument also hinges on social development - what he describes as "societies' abilities to get things done - to shape their physical, economic, social and intellectual environments to their own ends." The "things" that get done may involve inventing the plow, painting with watercolor, eating effectively with a fork or developing the gunpowder that will blow a ship out of the water.

While people, in the aggregate, are pretty much the same anywhere, Morris claims, "History teaches us that when the pressure is on, change takes off."

He articulates the Morris Theorem: "Change is caused by lazy, greedy, frightened people looking for easier, more profitable and safer ways to do things. And they rarely know what they're doing.

"While geography drives social development, social development determines what geography means. It's a two-way street."

For example, the geographical location of the British Isles sticking out into the North Atlantic kept them remote from the hotspots of Mesopotamia 5,000 years ago. By 500 years ago, however, social development had risen so sharply that geographical meanings flipped: the seafaring nation was uniquely placed to be closer to the New World without interference from other nations.

England's more efficient ships and proximity to the New World meant access to silver and gold - which were, in turn, sold to China, which by the 16th century was facing constant silver shortages. Hence England, the former backwater, had an inside track to Eastern markets.

Fast forward a few centuries: England is able to leverage its coal to power the Industrial Revolution, and its domination becomes global.

Great men or timely ideas could not conjure such a line-up of events. Attempts to bend nations to ideas or notions of "progress" have resulted in some of history's most infamous bloodbaths, in the last century alone. For example, "All the great communists said that in Asia, you have to do something to jump start the engine of history, which stalled a long time ago" - but high-minded words resulted in Mao Zedong and Vladimir Lenin.

As a scholar of the classics, Morris wondered how academia could justify the enormous research effort poured into the study of Greek and Roman antiquity - as opposed to, say, the resources put into Indus Valley civilizations.

Answering that question led him well beyond the confines of Mediterranean culture - and into biology, botany, geology, anthropology, sociology, modern politics, technology and all sorts of other unfamiliar turf. After years of research, he concluded that the Greek and Roman worlds were not unique in history. In an era of globalization, Western classical studies will have to share turf with other peoples, other civilizations.

In an era of specialization, it's an unusual and controversial step, but a necessary one: "If we don't have broadly focused people, we'll never be able to answer the important questions," he said.

Clearly, Morris is fascinated by all aspects of mankind's past - but he bears no nostalgia for it. "The past sucked," he said, reminding us of disease, early mortality and famine. He is also intrigued by a future that may detonate the paradigms of the past. Geography was everything in the past - but it may now become a thing of the past.

An obvious example: Technology is changing the rules of engagement. "The ancient distinctions between East and West will be irrelevant to robots," he writes.

Global warming is already creating upheaval in Asia, Africa and small island states. It may trigger the migrations of tens of millions, which could, in turn, cause wars and destabilize nations within what Morris calls "the arc of instability" from Southeast Asia to Western Africa.

"If the U.S. and Russia get involved, it could be the end of the world," he said, adding that post-Cold War Russia still has the world's biggest nuclear arsenal.

Is it too optimistic to suggest that, as the Morris Theorem argues, new pressures may create unexpected bonuses and solutions? After all, "The important history is global and evolutionary," he writes.

Provided by Stanford University