**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**Western Motivations in the Ottoman Empire, China and Japan (Chapter 19)**

**SLIDE 19.1**

Why were western powers so keen to open up markets in the Ottoman Empire, China and Japan?

**SLIDE 19.2 [Image: Carving up the pie of China]**

Profit was clearly a motive as westerners looked to sell the products of their industrial revolution in these regions. But for western governments, opening new markets was about much more than just making money.

By the nineteenth century, it had become clear that the newly industrialized economies of the West were prone to disruptive boom and bust cycles because the capitalist system periodically produced more goods than its workers could afford to buy. When overproduction occurred, it led to a collapse in prices, the closing of factories and spikes in unemployment. These economic downturns put intense strains on the social and political order. Large numbers of workers, concentrated in factory towns, lost their livelihoods at the same time. Under these circumstances, alternative ideologies to capitalism, especially socialism, found a following among workers whose desperate circumstances frequently led to protests and sometimes violence. To maintain social peace and existing social hierarchies, and to protect the wealth of the rich, western governments sought to end or at least mitigate these crises.

**SLIDE 19.3 [Image: Luddites destroying machinery]**

Social welfare programs designed to soften the blow of cyclical unemployment provided one solution. But foreign markets offered a second; and, in many ways, more attractive option. Opening foreign markets was potentially cheaper than providing relief for the poor, and, perhaps more importantly, helped to prevent economic disruptions in the first place by providing an outlet for surplus production. As we saw in Chapter 18, colonial markets offered a reliable outlet for manufactured goods. But colonies proved unable to absorb the ever-expanding amount of manufactured goods, so western industrial countries searched for more markets. European governments viewed trade with the Ottoman Empire, China and Japan not only as attractive, but necessary.

The British imperialist Cecil Rhodes succinctly expressed the fears that drove the search for foreign markets when he stated “Yesterday I attended a meeting of the unemployed in London and having listened to the wild speeches which were nothing more than a scream for bread, I returned home convinced more than ever of the importance of imperialism…. The British Empire is a matter of bread and butter. If you wish to avoid civil war you must be an imperialist.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

**SLIDE 19.4 [Image: Japan’s Modernization]**

So what drove western efforts to open up the Ottoman, Chinese and Japanese markets?

Profit surely played a role, especially for industrialists, merchants and traders who sold western goods in these regions. Efforts by western governments to maintain social peace at home provided another motivation to force open markets abroad.

But when assessing the forces at work, one has to consider the extent to which western exporters or governments were driving events and the extent to which they were reacting to circumstances. One could argue that both were responding to market forces generated by the new industrialized economies of the west, forces beyond their—or anyone else’s—immediate control. From this perspective it was the impersonal forces of industrialization that drove these developments, but human actors were responsible for how they played out on the ground. The relationship of such impersonal forces and the deliberate intentions of individuals and governments remains among the perennial issues of historical analysis.

1. *Ways of the World*, page 881. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)