4 World Horizon: China in the Renaissance, 1350 to 1650

For a history of China focused on Chinese relations with the outside world, the age of the Renaissance must hold a position of exceptional importance. If the modern world system was born in the middle ages with the mutation of Latin Christendom, the Mongolian explosion and the unification of information and disease, it began to walk, indeed leap forward, with the oceanic revolution, the Iberian empires and the first sustained extra-European missionary activity. It is arguable that before Columbus, Magellan and St Francis Xavier, there was no true world history. Philip II was the first planetary ruler in the sense of possessing lands in all four primary civilizations: Europe and America, the Far East and Black Africa. His was the first empire on which the sun never set: he was the true roi soleil of the Egyptomanes. From the sixteenth century there was little doubt that there was going to be a world system or that Western Europe was going to be its centre, as new world institutions, of which the two first were the Atlantic economy of Seville and the Jesuit international, were cantilevered out from it.

In this world-building, the role of China under the Ming dynasty 1368–1644 was as a horizon, neither inside nor out. After an attempt by the early Ming to dominate the environment both by land and sea, the middle Ming opted out of it and withdrew within their frontiers. For most of the Renaissance, China was a world in itself, a monad as far as possible windowless. Yet if the Chinese, except for an elite, were not interested in the outside world, the outside world was certainly interested in China. It was to Cathay that Columbus sailed, the principal result of Magellan’s voyage was the Sino–Spanish colony of Manila, and the China mission was the glory of the Jesuits. If mainland China’s contact with the world being built by Europe was marginal, margins can domi-
nate and even distant horizons frame. Nominally a closed country, with an even more closed Confucian mind, China under the Ming was losing her autonomy and becoming dependent on a world system not of her making. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Chinese economy was ebbing with the tide of the Atlantic, Chinese diplomacy and Chinese artillery were dependent on Jesuit expertise, and a Chinese emperor was about to study Euclid’s *Elements*.

**CHINA’S PLACE IN THE WORLD, 1350 to 1650**

In the second half of the sixteenth century, four empires reached their apogee: the Ming under the Wan-li emperor (1573–1620) during the ministry of Chang Chü-cheng (1573–82); the Moghul, better described as later Timurid, under Akbar (1556–1605) during the ministry of Raja Todar Mal (1562–86); the Ottoman under Selim II (1566–74) during the ministry of Sokollu Mehmet Pasha (1565–79); and the Habsburg under Philip II (1556–98) during the ministry of Cardinal Granvelle (1579–86). This coincidence of imperial apogees and ministériats was not merely fortuitous. It was orchestrated by the common prosperity brought about by the second and greater expansionary period of the Atlantic economy of Seville. Yet behind the single rhythm were different local scores: the Ming restoration, the Islamic revival and the Christian Renaissance; and the parts in the concord were far from identical.

**The Ming restoration**

The Ming dynasty dated its accession to 1368 when Toghon Temür, the Yüan emperor who had received Marignolli, fled from Peking to Jehol. The fall of the Mongol *ordo* state had taken twenty years of blood and confusion. So long as the emperor maintained the masterful prime minister Toghto in office (1349–54), it did not look inevitable, despite a hydra-like undercrust of revolt in the semi-urban half-moon from Shantung to Chekiang circling the tax base of the empire, the lower Yangtze conurbation.¹