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Culture and Collapse

May 30, 2008 in [Watching the China Watchers](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)
By Pierre Fuller

China has shown a “dismayingly cavalier attitude toward the well-being of its people,” a British journalist turned pop historian determined recently [in the pages of the *New York Times*](#). The Chinese, he explained, long ago handed over science – and by extension earthquake resistant engineering – to “the West,” leaving “themselves to become mired, time and again, in the kind of tragic events that we are witnessing this week.” The thrust of this piece by Simon Winchester (which simultaneously [appeared in the *International Herald Tribune*](#) and evidently stems from his latest books, *The Man Who Loved China* (2008), on Joseph Needham, the chronicler of the history of Chinese science, and *A Crack in the Edge of the World* (2005), on the San Francisco quake of 1906) was China’s fall in the sixteenth century from mankind’s technological pioneer to a “culture that turned its back on its remarkable and glittering history” and “became impoverished, backward and prey to the caprices of nature.”

On the face of it, this bestselling author is right to point out that China has a long way to go with quake-resistant construction. The fact that Sichuan, until recently China’s biggest province by population, is a mountainous area where landslides and cracked dams exacerbate such disasters does not help. But by asking why China has not kept pace with “America” on this, Winchester forgets that Western advances in this regard are remarkably recent. San Francisco, as he well knows, was reduced to a pancake in 1906. And I don’t know what he means by today’s “America” (trend-setting San Francisco? or the trailer home communities across the country that fly like poker cards from every tornado?) but the University of California from which I am writing started retro-fitting its buildings just in the last few decades. Winchester must then mean China is a few decades behind, but he makes it sound like centuries.

At what date did China become “impoverished” relative to Europe? By the standards of European welfare policies, eighteenth century Qing China saw as high a standard of living and remarkably thorough disaster relief measures. The very engineering feats Winchester sees abandoned after the sixteenth century continued for centuries to carry grain north through vast river control works and canals from the lush paddies of the south, a flow of food that the state consistently diverted to drought, flood, or earthquake struck areas. Only in the 1800s did silting and periodic neglect threaten the river engineering system. And only then did the Chinese state begin to feel the pinch of fiscal insolvency amid incessant rebellion and a bloated imperial bureaucracy. On this last factor, Winchester’s point that historically Chinese men simply wanted to be pencil-pushing bureaucrats in a Confucian mold overlooks the fact that being, say, a local magistrate and an engineer was not at all mutually exclusive; magistrates circulated from one post to the next reading dike or well-digging guidebooks written by their predecessors, revising them, sometimes putting out their own mass-produced editions on China’s printing block press. In sum, explaining historical change as an entire people consciously and collectively “turning their back,” without the internal divisions people usually see marking their own society, is dubious at best.

When determining that China fails to protect its people today, Winchester also confuses engineering know-how with the awesome sum of money required for its installation. The CCP’s Politburo is stocked with officials who were trained as engineers; China’s top leadership knows this stuff. But people want roofs over their heads today, not in a safer, richer tomorrow, which will come for China. The post-1949 regime saw faster increases in literacy (i.e. schools) and infant-survival and life-expectancy (i.e. clinics and hospitals) than ever before in human history, hardly a national “cavalier attitude” towards human welfare, and a policy that surely would have been stunted by requiring world-class building codes for these thousands of buildings. Of course, since Deng Xiaoping, China has exploded with foreign exchange – but this is spread thin by a population four times that of the U.S. And even when addressing the pervasive graft accompanying this veritable gold rush, different levels in the bureaucracy need to be distinguished. Many of the protests over neglected labor or environmental laws, or in this case, construction quality, are targeted at [corrupt local officials](#) in cahoots with private or family interests. If anything, the party leadership is bolstered in comparison. Think Premier Wen Jiabao, now affectionately dubbed “Grandpa Wen.” Regardless, after the fiasco of the New Orleans

levee system and the Minneapolis bridge collapse, how different does this look from Winchester's "America"? Maybe the problem here is one of perception. To us our problems are political or incidental: Bush's fault, money diverted to Iraq, a single inspector's negligence. But when people in Sichuan suffer, something is wrong with "China." Then, it's a cultural problem.

Pierre Fuller, a PhD candidate at the University of California, Irvine, is researching his dissertation on local famine relief in Republican China.