The 'First Great Divergence':
Trajectories of post-ancient state formation in eastern and western Eurasia

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Abstract: This paper identifies divergent trends in state formation after the disintegration of the Roman and Han empires and considers their causes and long-term consequences.

Convergence

In the most general terms, state formation in eastern and western Eurasia unfolded in similar ways from the late second millennium BCE until the early first millennium CE. In both cases, large Bronze Age states collapsed into hundreds of small polities (in the Iron Age East Mediterranean and in Spring-and-Autumn China) which were subsequently consolidated into unified political-military systems in which a small number of major powers competed for dominance (in the Mediterranean in the last eight centuries BCE and in Warring States China). This process culminated in the creation of core-wide empires that lasted for several centuries (the mature Roman empire and the Qin-Han empire). The institutions of the Later Roman Empire in the fourth to sixth centuries CE resembled those of the mature Han empire much more closely than those of any of the earlier western state had resembled those of earlier eastern states. Abiding differences can be identified in the spheres of military and ideological power, with stronger marginalization of the military and closer ties between political and ideological power (Legalism-Confucianism) in Han China compared to the Roman empire. However, even in those spheres some convergent trends did eventually emerge, such as warlordism in the late Han, Three Kingdoms, and Western Jin periods and the attempted cooptation of Christianity by the late Roman state. Moreover, both states ended in similar ways, with their more exposed halves (the west in the case of Rome, the north in China) being taken over by semiperipheral 'barbarians' and turned into a handful of large but unstable successor states that relied to varying degrees on existing institutions of government (Goths, Franks, Vandals, and Lombards in the West, the so-called 'Sixteen Kingdoms' in northern China), while traditionalist regimes survived in the other halves (Byzantium and five of the 'Six Dynasties' in southern China, respectively).[1]

Divergence

By the sixth century CE, these trends finally began to diverge. At that time, attempts to regain lost Roman possessions in the western Mediterranean succeeded only in part, and in the following century the East Roman state faced near-fatal assaults by Persians, Avars, and most importantly Arabs. Despite the tremendous scale of their initial success, the Arabs were unable to create a stable ecumenical empire. Political fragmentation throughout western Eurasia increased during the late first millennium CE, most notably in Christian Europe where states gradually lost the ability to control and tax populations and sovereignty de facto came to be shared among monarchs, lords, local strongmen, semi-independent towns, and clergy. The (re-)creation of centralized states was a drawn-out process that primarily unfolded during the first half of the second millennium CE but in some cases took even longer, creating a cluster of polities in which balancing mechanisms prevented the creation of a core-wide empire. Instead, intense interstate competition, internal social and intellectual upheavals, the creation of new kinds of maritime empire, and (eventually) technological progress, gave rise to the modern nation state. In sixth-century CE China, by contrast, imperial re-unification restored the bureaucratic state that largely succeeded, albeit with substantial interruptions, in maintaining a core-wide empire under Chinese or foreign leadership until 1911 CE. In some ways, the People's Republic today is merely the most recent reincarnation of this entity.

[1] For more detailed discussion, see Scheidel 2008 and forthcoming.

Proximate causes

Two distinct but related issues are at stake: the survival and reinvigoration of the centralized state as the dominant form of political organization in China as European (and to some extent also southwest Asian) states entered a prolonged phase of diminished capabilities, and the restoration of unified political control within an area that was broadly co-extensive with preceding core-wide empires, a goal that was accomplished in China but not in Europe or southwest Asia. For the purpose of explanatory analysis, we need to distinguish between the proximate and ultimate causes of these developments. In a first step, I briefly introduce a recent model of change in post-Roman western Eurasia and then suggest ways of interpreting developments in post-Han China within the framework provided by this model.

Western Eurasia

Chris Wickham has developed a model of proximate causation for large parts of post-ancient western Eurasia.[2] The 'strong' Roman state (which counted and taxed a demilitarized civilian population in order to support a large standing army) was succeeded in part by states that maintained systems of taxation and salaried armies (the East Roman and early Arab states) and in part by weaker or weakening states whose rulers gradually lost the ability to count and tax their subjects (the Germanic successor states in the west). In some marginal areas, state institutions collapsed altogether, most notably in Britain. In 'strong' states with registration, taxation, and centrally controlled military forces, rulers enjoyed greater autonomy from elite interests, and elites depended to a significant extent on the state (for offices, salaries, and indirect benefits) to establish and maintain their status. In 'weak' states, elites relied more on the resources they themselves controlled and enjoyed greater autonomy from the rulers. In the absence of centralized tax collection and coercive capabilities, the power of rules depended largely on elite cooperation. From the perspective of the general population, local elites rather than state rulers dominated, and feudal relationships were a likely outcome. At the same time, in the absence of trans-regional integration that is characteristic of 'strong' states, elites tended to be less wealthy. These conditions also had profound consequences for economic performance, eroding interregional exchange in and among 'weak' states. Over time, even the relatively 'strong' post-Roman successor states witnessed a decline of state taxation and salaried military forces, most notably in seventh- and eighth-century CE Byzantium. The Umayyad Empire also suffered from the regionalization of revenue collection and military power.[3]

In this context of fiscal decline and decentralization of political and military power, it became harder to maintain state capabilities (especially in the military sphere), economic activity was curtailed, and the prospects for the restoration of a stable core-wide empire were poor. Eventually, even the Abbasid Empire splintered into a number of regional successor states, and attempts by Charlemagne and the Ottonians to set up larger empires in northwest Europe proved short-lived. In different parts of Europe, the success of subsequent efforts to stem the erosion of the state and to restore central state capabilities varied greatly in terms of speed and scope.[4] In the Eastern Mediterranean, only the Ottoman Empire eventually achieved historically high levels of central state control.[5]

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[2] Wickham 2005. This summary is indebted to Sarris 2006.
[3] For the latter two polities, see esp. Haldon 1997 and Kennedy 2001. See also Wickham, in this volume.
[4] See esp. Tilly 1992; Spruyt 1994; Ertman 1997; Glete 2002.
[5] E.g., Imber 2002: ch. 5.

China

I hope to show that Wickham's explanatory framework can fruitfully be applied to account for developments in early medieval China that differed signally from conditions in western Eurasia.[6] Modern narratives of the principal northern successor states in fifth and sixth centuries CE consistently emphasize the gradual restoration of Han-style governmental institutions that enabled rulers to count and tax an increasing proportion of their subjects, curb elite autonomy, and mobilize growing resources for military efforts that eventually resulted in imperial reunification.[7] The actual degree of government control at different times during the Period of Disunion (317-589 CE) is hard to determine empirically. If we accept reported census tallies as proxy evidence for the strength of the central authorities,[8] it appears that the collapse of the Han regime resulted in a dramatic relaxation of centralized control. Census tallies for the second century CE range from 9.2 to 10.8 million households with 47.6 to 56.5 million residents. Reported totals of *c.*1.7 million households in all the Three Kingdoms combined (*c.*240s/260s CE) as well as the Western Jin tally of 2.5 million for the entire empire in 280 CE are therefore clearly defective.[9] Even if the latter were indeed a tally of taxable households only, it would primarily reflect the state's inability to tax a large majority of all existing households. Three centuries later, by contrast, census quality had greatly improved. In the late 570s, the northern states of Northern Qi and Northern Zhou together counted 6.9 million households with 29 million residents, and twenty years after the absorption of the Chen state in the south the tally had risen to 8.9 million households with 46 million individuals (609 CE), close to Eastern Han levels.[10] These figures indicate that – at least – by the sixth century CE, the northern successor states had re-attained a capacity to count and tax the general population that was roughly comparable to that achieved by the intact Han state.

This impression is reinforced by references to the deployment of very large military forces by these states, such as 170,000 soldiers in 575 CE, 145,000 in 576 CE, 518,000 in 588 CE, 300,000 in 598 CE, 600,000 in 611 CE, and 1,133,000 in 612 CE.[11] Even though these numbers are bound to be inflated to various degrees, they are reminiscent of similarly large figures reported for the Warring States and Western Han periods,[12] and are of a completely different order of magnitude from military tallies from post-Roman Europe where rulers were rarely able to muster more than a few thousand fighters at a time and the shrinking East Roman state began to find itself in a similar situation.[13] The logistical feats of Northern Zhou during the conquest of southern China were also far beyond the reach of any western Eurasian powers at the time.

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[6] For Wickham's own earlier views on state power in China, see Wickham 1994: 51-56.

[7] See esp. Pearce 1987, and more concisely Graff 2002: ch. 5 and Lewis forthcoming ch. 3.

[8] It would be wong to assume assume that census totals from this period primarily document demographic conditions. Although it is likely that war and crises caused significant demographic losses through death and migration, the record contains sudden massive fluctuations that cannot possibly reflect reality: the best examples are shifts from 10.7 million households in 157 CE to 1.7 million (composite figure for all polities) in 264 CE; from 4.2 million (ditto) in 580 CE to 8.9 million in 609 CE; from 8.9 million in 755 CE to 1.9 million in 760 CE (!); and from 4.5 million in 996 CE to 7.4 million in 1006 CE and on to 9.1 million in 1014 CE (see Bielenstein 1987: 12, 15, 17, 19-20, 47). These observations suggest that census tallies are best used as an index of state strength rather than as straightforward demographic evidence.

[9] Bielenstein 1987: 12, 15-17.

[10] Bielenstein 1987: 1987: 17-19. Cf. also Graff 2002: 127 and 136 n.19 for a reference to 5 million households and 32 million people in the unified North right before 523 CE.

[11] Graff 2002: ch. 6-7.

[12] Lewis 1999: 625-628; Chang 2007: 177-179.

[13] Halsall 2003: ch. 6; Haldon 2003: 101-103.

Wickham's model for western Eurasia invites speculation about the eventual success of the northern successor states in China. The existing census figures for their southern rival are consistently very low (500,000-600,000 households in the 580s CE, and 900,000 households for a significantly larger area in 464 CE) and cannot possibly reflect actual conditions: in the late Han period, fully one-third of the empire's census population had been located south of the Central Plain region, with ten million subjects residing south of the Yangzi river by 140 CE.[14] Moreover, subsequent immigration flows primarily benefited the southern parts of China. It appears that the southern successor state was unable or unwilling to count (and hence impose direct taxes on) more than a modest fraction of existing households and potential taxpayers. These problems seem to have persisted beyond reunification: it is instructive to compare the maps showing the geographical distribution of the census population in 140 and 609 CE,[15] which indicates that even by the Sui period, the government had not been able to restore Han standards of registration in the southern provinces. This interpretation is consistent with the relatively small size of the military forces reportedly marshalled by southern regimes, at least when compared to the northern Tuoba states. The state frequently drew on marginal elements such as convicts and aboriginal groups to perform military service. As David Graff points out, 'the southern rulers did not have full access to this population for purposes of tax and corvée because so many people were sheltered as the tenants or dependants of powerful families'.[16] This would suggest that the Six Dynasties regime displayed characteristics of the 'weak' state, in which local elites were adept at containing the central authorities in the competition for surplus generated by primary producers. This in turn is consistent with the notion of a southern state that relied more heavily on indirect taxes (such as tolls and commercial taxes) fed by dynamic economic development in Yangzhou province that foreshadowed later growth in the Tang and Song periods. These revenues were supplemented by so-called 'returning capital', de facto tribute derived from 'gifts' (also known as 'miscellaneous tribute') extorted by provincial officials and shared with the central government upon their return to the court.[17] Both of these sources of income reduced the state's need to maintain regularized agrarian taxation, and thus costly census registration. It may be helpful to think in terms of a feedback loop between elite autonomy and the state's concentration on commercial and irregular income which reinforced both tendencies over time and created an equilibrium between elite demands (that captured most of the agrarian surplus) and state demands (focusing on indirect taxes on commerical activity and tributary predation that was outsourced to roving state agents beyond the capital region). While this equilibrium was sufficient to sustain the state and secure a balance between central and elite power, it proved inadequate in direct competition with the more populous and more centralized state of the Northern Zhou.

It is hard to be sure to what extent the third, fourth, and early fifth centuries CE represented a period of more substantially diminished state power that was only gradually overcome by the final Tuoba regimes in the north. In northern China, the political instability of the fourth century CE in particular, with its rapidly shifting frontiers and changing foreign regimes, would not seem to have been conducive to centralized supervision, registration, and revenue collection. The emergence of large numbers of fortified settlements across the northern regions that were organized around clans and village units and designed to protect (and therefore likely to establish local-level control over) the native agricultural population must also have posed a challenge to centralized control. For instance, contemporary accounts refer to large numbers of people being sheltered and concealed from the government in walled villages and avoiding taxes and corvées in the Murong state of Former Yan.[18] At the same time, the extent of any such abatement must not be exaggerated. A surviving census tally of

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[14] Graff 2002: 93 n.1; de Crespigny 2004: table 2, and cf. de Crespigny 1990: 7-58.
[15] Bielenstein 1987: 194, 199.
[16] Graff 2002: 127.
[17] Liu 2001, esp. 47-48.
[18] Tang 1990: 123-124.

2.5 million households with 10 million people for the same Murong state of Former Yan in 370 CE refers to an area roughly equivalent to that of the later state of Northern Qi, which registered 3.3 million households and 20 million people in 577 CE.[19] Focusing on the number of households (which are easier to count than individuals) and allowing for some demographic growth in the intervening 200 years, the Former Yan figure may be taken to reflect a fair amount of continuity in governmental control. Indeed, the discovery of primary evidence for civil service examinations in the marginal and ephemeral northwestern successor state of Western Liang, dating from 408 CE, points to formal bureaucratic continuity even in unexpected areas.[20] Various land taxes are attested for the Northern Wei state for much of the fifth century CE.[21]

Ultimate causes

To say that key state institutions survived better or were restored faster in China during the Period of Disunion than in post-Roman Europe, or that the Northern Zhou state managed to reunify the core regions of China because of its superior organization and consequent control over people and resources, does not properly explain the two issues noted at the beginning of the previous section. It merely raises the question of the underlying causes of China's success in preserving and restoring imperial institutions of control. A variety of factors may have contributed to this outcome.

Geography

Geography may go some way toward explaining why it was easier to maintain a single very large state in China, which is compact (in the sense of a favorable ratio of surface area to border length) and relatively well shielded on three sides by mountains and ocean, than anywhere in the extended western Eurasian ecumene that stretches from the Atlantic to eastern Iran and is more exposed to population movements.[22] At the same time, the presence of an inner sea core in the form of the Mediterranean Sea and of navigable rivers that criss-cross its hinterlands might well be considered more conducive to unity than the parallel river valleys that segment China and the historically marginal position of the Pacific Ocean. Most importantly, geographical features per se are unlikely to account for divergent trends in state strength as opposed to state size.

The absence of very large states from Europe is a feature that constitutes an anomaly in the temperate zone that stretches east-west across Eurasia. In unpublished work, Peter Turchin points out that among seventy-odd empires in world history that covered more than 1 million square kilometers, the Roman Empire was the only such polity ever to exist for more than a century in western Eurasia west of Russia. Turchin seeks the explain the formation of large-scale empires as a function of competitive relations between sedentary agriculturalists and steppe populations which favored the creation of very large states in the frontier regions of the Middle East, India, and China.[23] Once again, however, even if correct, this observation would not fully explain the weakness of state institutions in post-Roman Europe. A coherent and well-organized metropole is a vital precondition for the creation of a durable large empire.[24]

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[19] Bielenstein 1987: 17.
[20] Dien 2001, on a manuscript from Turfan.
[21] Eberhard 1949: 209-211; Yang 1961: 146-147.
[22] Cf. Diamond 1997: 411-417.
[23] I am grateful to Peter Turchin for sharing his unpublished work with me.
[24] For the characteristics required of an imperial metropole, see Doyle 1986: 128-129.

Demography

It appears that in the late ancient and early medieval periods, western Eurasia was more heavily affected by epidemics than China.[25] However, even approximate levels of population loss are hard to ascertain for either one of the regions under review. While attempts to associate post-Roman decline with demographic contraction and concurrent dislocations caused by epidemic disease or other environmental crises are currently experiencing a revival in the academic community, they remain of questionable value and generally suffer from a lack of quantification.[26] No relevant figures survive from late or post-Roman Europe, but in as much as field surveys can be used to reconstruct changes in population size rather than consumption patterns, the archaeological data suggest that (with the exception of southwest Asia) population in western Eurasia was lower in the seventh century CE than it had been in the second century CE. As noted above, Chinese census tallies exhibit sudden fluctuations that are best seen as a function of registration quality (that is, as an index of state strength): while demographic losses must have occurred (through natural decrease or emigration), their extent cannot be directly gauged from the available records. In the most general terms, however, the fact that the Sui state counted roughly the same number of people and households in 609 CE as the Han government had been able to register in the 140s CE suggests that by the time of reunification, overall population densities had already re-attained late Han-period levels.[27] In this regard, conditions in western Eurasia differed significantly from those in the east. It remains open to debate, however, whether population loss in the West may justifiably be regarded as a principal factor in the weakening of state institutions and the failure of to restore the Roman empire or establish an equivalent durable super-state. In this context, it merits attention that the Persian Achaemenid empire covered an area almost as large as that of the Roman empire but controlled a far smaller population; that many of the European provinces of the Roman empire cannot have been more populated at the moment of their incorporation than they were after the fall of the Roman state; and that the Ottoman empire was set up in the wake of the Black Death. Thus, demographic conditions per se may be a poor indicator of the feasibility of empire.

The nature of earlier government institutions

We must also consider the possibility that the differential resilience of governmental institutions under 'barbarian' successor regimes was to some extent predetermined by their original character at the time of the intact Roman and Han empires. In the Warring States period, prolonged inconclusive 'symmetric' warfare among organizationally similar polities had encouraged intensifying self-strengthening reforms that promoted centralization, rationalization, bureaucratization, and the formation of territorial states.[28] This gave rise to monarchical regimes that – by pre-modern historical standards – were highly successful in curtailing elite autonomy and in exploiting the civilian and military labor of the general population. Even after the collapse of the Qin regime, the Han state (especially following the war-driven reforms of the late second century BCE) managed to maintain an elaborate bureaucracy and various mechanisms of centralized control. After another push towards centralization under the Wang Mang regime in the early first century CE had failed, the Eastern Han state experienced higher levels of elite autonomy, although the formal institutions of government all survived. In the case of Rome, early self-strengthening reforms (prompted by symmetric warfare within Italy and against Carthage in the fourth and third centuries BCE) were aborted once Rome, endowed with a numerically strong militia system,

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[25] Thus Adshead 2000: 61-63, who also thinks that Europe was harmed by climatic change that benefited China (58-60).
[26] Plague: Stathakopoulos 2004; Little 2007; Rosen 2007. Other disasters: e.g., Keys 1999. For skepticism, see esp. Wickham 2005: 548-549.
[27] Bielenstein 1987: 12, 19.
[28] See esp. Hui 2005; Zhao 2006.

faced mostly asymmetric competition (against imperial states that relied more heavily on smaller professional military forces and against the tribes and chiefdoms of a less developed periphery) that could easily be overcome without further domestic rationalization. The shift to a monarchical regime changed little, until the crisis of the mid-third-century CE (accompanied by temporary state fragmentation) triggered farther-reaching centralizing reforms that resulted in a more uniform state with a growing civilian bureaucracy.[29] As a result, considerable initial differences (between the centralized and bureaucratized monarchies of the Warring State period and the patrimonial oligarchy of the Roman Republican imperial-hegemonic polity) were gradually eroded over time, in the sense that the institutions of the Later Roman Empire (in the fourth to sixth centuries CE) resembled those of the Han empire much more closely than the institutions of the Roman Republic had resembled those of the Warring States. This suggests that the distinction between Rome as an empire run by an elite of property-owners and China as an empire of office-holders may be overdrawn:[30] by the late imperial period, the Roman state had created elite echelons that depended to a significant degree on office-holding, while the Han state, notwithstanding pretensions to meritocracy, also favored the recruitment of the propertied for governmental service. Both systems relied critically on patronage. Moreover, while our evidence for the Roman imperial census is quite limited and slanted towards what was arguably the most bureaucratized part of the empire (namely, Egypt), based on what we do know there is no reason to suppose that the Roman registration system was inferior to Han practices. Therefore, the actual difference between the Roman and Han systems of government, and the extent to which the central government provided local governance, should not be overrated. It is not at all clear whether the Han bureaucracy was inherently more firmly entrenched in society than its late Roman counterpart, and/or that this helped it maintain its hierarchies and attendant institutions of government beyond the collapse of the unified empire. This issue calls for more detailed comparative study.[31]

The nature of the successor regimes

In both western and eastern Eurasia, conquest elites replaced the existing rulers and their courts and assigned privileged positions to their warrior entourages. For instance, the Former Zhao state of the early fourth century CE separated the conquering Xiongnu (as *guoren*, 'compatriots') from the subjugated Chinese: the former ruled and performed military service while the latter farmed, paid taxes, and provided corvée labor.[32] This distinction was upheld by the Tuoba Xianbei whose Northern Wei state for the first time re-united northern China in 439 CE. In the west, Germans received shares of land on which they settled.[33] In addition to this entitlement and benefits that might accrue from continuing military service, the newcomers were at least initially formally distinguished from the local populations: for instance, the Ostrogoths in Italy did not assume Roman citizenship and were therefore unable to hold civilian offices; they may also have been subject to separate laws.[34] In North Africa, religious affiliation separated the Vandals from local mainstream society. In the more durable successor states of Visigothic Spain and Francia, however, Germans and locals merged over time: by the late seventh century CE, everybody in northern France was considered a Frank. Unlike in northern China, this did not seem to require formal decrees by the rulers.

From the perspective of Wickham's model, the replacement of imperial courts and professional armies by foreign conquest elites assumed crucial significance only if it entailed

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[29] See now esp. Eich 2005.
[30] Wood 2003: 26-32.
[31] This is a major theme of Stanford 2008a.
[32] Graff 2002: 59.
[33] This is a more plausible reconstruction than Goffart's poorly supported thesis that they received a share of tax revenues instead: see Goffart 2006: ch.6, with Wickham 2005: 84-86.
[34] Maier 2005: 62.

changes in compensation practices: if new administrators and military forces had continued to receive government salaries derived from generalized taxation, a 'strong' state might readily have been maintained. The Umayyad state, with its elaborate system of stipends for soldiers and their descendants, illustrates this principle, at least at the regional level – although in that case, the crucial element of central control had already been lost. However, if the foreign conquerors had been given land allotments (or guaranteed stipends from land allotments owned or cultivated by others), the state's motivation for persevering in population registration and direct taxation might have been greatly diminished. To varying degrees, this latter scenario seems to apply to the Germanic successor states.[35] If these polities were weakened by the settlement of the original Germanic immigrants on the land and the consequent erosion of population registration, taxation, and ultimately centralized government control (– and similar features can be observed in the East Roman state after the mid-seventh century CE), we must ask whether the Xiongnu and Xianbei elements that had come to control northern China from the early fourth century CE onward were supported in ways that were more conducive to continuing fiscal activities and the maintenance of mechanisms that connected the central government with local communities.[36]

The fourth- and fifth-century practice of forcibly relocating large numbers of subject Chinese to the political centers of the various northern successor states suggests that their labor was required to support not just the courts but also the attached foreign *guoren* populations. It is hard to see how this system of concentrating and exploiting civilians in the capital regions and controlling outlying areas with the help of local fortress chiefs was compatible with the concurrent maintenance of institutionalized state-wide bureaucratic structures and the survival of centrally supervised population registration and taxation at the district level. This is an important issue for our understanding of state strength and continuity in government. Ray Huang notes that if left to their own devices, the leaders of coalitions of these local self-defense units might have turned into feudal lords but that this development was aborted by government raids on these settlements that deprived leaders of their 'semi-formed local autonomy'.[37] In this case, the presence of a strong and highly mobile central army in the form of Xiongnu and Xianbei cavalry units under the direct control of rulers may have been a critical factor. Germanic rulers do not normally appear to have maintained centrally deployed standing military forces beyond royal bodyguards (a royal slave army in sixth-century CE Visigothic Spain is a telling exception), and rulers increasingly relied on armies raised through the intermediation of their lords. Later recourse to mercenaries was motivated by growing problems with this process.[38] In China, by contrast, developments in the military sphere tended to increase state power. Kenneth Klein has argued that centralization was in part driven by the pressure exerted by the Rouran in the steppe, which caused the Tuoba rulers of Northern Wei to set up frontier garrisons, thereby mimicking the behavior toward steppe peoples conventionally displayed by the imperial agrarian state.[39] Later on, conflict between the Tuoba regimes of Western Wei/Northern Zhou and Eastern Wei/Northern Qi likewise precipitated the creation of enhanced mobilization mechanisms, especially in the former entities where a relative scarcity of Tuoba forces encouraged the military mobilization of large numbers of Chinese who had previously primarily been employed in logistical and support functions. The powerful 'Twenty-Four Army' system that eventually facilitated imperial re-unification was the main fruit of these developments.[40]

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[35] Wickham 2005: 84.

[36] Salaries for Tuoba state officials are attested from the late fifth century CE onward: Eberhard 1949: 93.

[37] Huang 1997: 77. The Tuoba state bestowed official titles on defeated fortress chiefs to incorporate them into formal state hierarchies: Graff 2002: 61.

[38] Halsall 2003 provides the most recent survey.

[39] Klein 1980.

[40] Pearce 1987: 519-673; Graff 2002: 108-111.

The successful preservation of centralized military capabilities and of at least rudimentary administrative institutions was a vital precondition for the eventual resurgence of the state in northern China. In 485 CE, the Northern Wei court sought to introduce an Equal Fields system, with standardized land allotments to individual households. This measure was accompanied by the designation of prominent villagers charged with the verification of census registers and the supervision of tax collection. More generally, the measures reported for the sixth century CE, especially for the Northern Zhou regime, reflect a state with considerable capabilities which used them to expand them even further.[41] This raises the question of how much rulers had to rebuild from scratch and to what extent state control had always been maintained at the local level, even in times of upheaval.[42] This is a key problem of the history of this period and requires more systematic investigation than it has received, at least in western-language scholarship.

Instead, modern research tends to be strongly preoccupied with the issue of 'Sinicization', the adoption of Chinese cultural traits by the conquerors who had relocated from the steppe.[43] To some degree, this may be a function of a corresponding (and unsurprising) focus in the Chinese sources or of similar processes in the later Liao, Jin, and Yuan conquest states. In a discussion of state formation, however, we must ask whether this trend – however well-documented – was of particular causal significance for the eventual outcome of imperial reunification. It may be relevant here that the destroyer of the unified Western Jin empire, Liu Yuan, was keen to maintain the existing bureaucratic system early on and relied on Chinese officials to do so.[44] On the other hand, attempts to enforce acculturation could destabilize and even split the state, as happened in the 'Six Garrisons Rebellion' that followed emperor Xiaowen's mass transfer of Tuoba to Luoyang.[45] Attempts to merge Tuoba and Chinese elites would have changed the character of court society but it is not at all self-evident whether or to what extent improved state capabilities (especially the ability to mobilize labor and resources for war-making through bureaucratic penetration of society down to the level of the individual household) were causally associated with acculturation processes at the top. For example, analogous hybridization processes in post-Roman Europe produced fusion elites who did *not* in the long run support state centralization.

Ideological power

The issue of culture change also raises broader questions concerning the role of ideological power. The Sinological tradition habitually emphasizes the long-term importance of Confucian elite traditions (or rather of the Confucian-Legalist version that been created in the Western Han period) that favored the concept of a well-ordered unified state managed by civilian bureaucrats. But does that mean that China differed from western Eurasia in terms of the strength of people's commitment to the ideal of imperial revival? A comparative approach is necessary to judge the actual influence of this ideational variable. If viewed in isolation, the Chinese pro-imperial intellectual tradition may seem likely to be endowed with causal force in endogenously promoting state strength and imperial restoration. However, analogous ideological commitments to unity in the post-Roman Christian priestly elite and the harnessing of the notion of an eternal Roman empire in attempts at empire-building, most notably by Charlemagne and the Ottonians, as well as the comparable ideal of the political unity of the Islamic *umma* consistently failed to bring about the desired outcome or even stem

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[41] Pearce 1987 and 2001.

[42] Elvin 1973: 47 notes the problem that prior to 485 CE, 'until this fiscal system was improved … there was little hope of consolidating imperial authority … conversely, until there was greater imperial authority an improvement of the fiscal position … was hardly possible'. His answer that the government did both at once does not really resolve this conundrum.

[43] This is a key theme in Klein 1980; Kang 1983; Pearce 1987; Honey 1988; Graff 2002.

[44] Honey 1988: 172.

[45] Kang 1983.

the erosion of existing state capabilities. This casts doubt on the actual influence of elite ideals.

Moreover, the eventual resurgence of the Confucian tradition as a pillar of empire may not have been a foregone conclusion. Buddhism was popular among the immigrants from the steppe, and the temporary efflorescence of Buddhist monasteries (in terms of manpower and material resources) in the Northern Wei period[46] suggests a measure of convergence between developments in early medieval China and late Roman and post-Roman Europe, where the Christian establishment accumulated vast resources, threatened to crowd out the state in the competition for human capital, and eventually even came to share in its sovereignty. As – very much later – in Christian Europe, it was the growing power of the state that curbed religious autonomy.

A more sophisticated ideational model has been advocated by Dingxin Zhao who argues that by the early Han period, the Chinese empire had crystallized into a Confucian-Legalist state that fused political and ideological power. Even as the state decayed on later occasions, as long as no other ideologies could better legitimize the state and Confucian scholars survived as a class, any new rulers (such as steppe invaders) came to rely on imperial Confucianism for legitimization and on Confucian scholars (who were at once priests and bureaucrats) to govern the country.[47] However, while this model seeks to account for the longevity of Confucian prominence, it does not in itself explain repeated imperial reunification. Confucian scholars merely provided a convenient instrument of management. At the same time, the absence of an equivalent pool of quasi-priestly bureaucrats in the Christian west may have made it more difficult for post-Roman regimes to maintain or restore a 'strong' state: the intrinsically autonomous and schismatically riven Christian churches that had evolved outside and in some sense in opposition to the imperial state could not provide comparable services (just as Chinese Buddhism did not either). Thus, abiding frictions between political and ideological power in the post-Roman world (overcome only in the case of the mature Byzantine and Russian Orthodox Church) may have served as one impediment (among others) to state strengthening and imperial expansion.

Chance

Historical outcomes with far-reaching consequences need not necessarily be determined by deep-seated structural factors (the failure of the Persian invasions of Greece in the early fifth century BCE may be a suitable example). However, in this case it is difficult to identify occasions where minor counterfactual events (such as the different outcome of a battle or the death of a ruler) were likely to have made a difference to the observed sixth-century CE divergence. It is hard, for instance, to see how any specific decision that Justinian or Charlemagne might have made differently would have led to them succeeding in restoring a Roman-scale empire; or how different results in the Arabs' civil wars would have produced an enduring caliphate. The gradual erosion of central government in western Eurasia was a widespread phenomenon: similar conditions precipitated similar outcomes in different polities of the macro-region. By contrast, the northern successor states of China show ample evidence of successful centralization and mobilization of resources. The eventual strength of the last Tuoba states following the collapse of the unified Northern Wei state after the 'Six Garrisons Revolt' is a good illustration of this trend: it suggests that intermittent setbacks did not alter the overall trajectory of state formation in this period. Given the strength of the Northern Zhou state, imperial reunification was always a highly likely outcome. Conversely, even if the sixth-century East Roman state had somehow managed to conquer the Visigoths and Franks and contain the Lombards, it would still have faced a resurgent Persian Empire, the effects of the plague, and, in the seventh century, the Arab invasions. In western Eurasia, renewed state

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[46] Demiéville 1986: 856-857; cf. Gernet 1995 for the following centuries.
[47] Zhao 2006, and work in progress.

formation on a Roman scale became increasingly less likely over time. These general trends suggests that contingency played little part in the 'First Great Divergence'.

Consequences

The final, and biggest, question is whether any of this mattered in the long run. Did the 'First Great Divergence' of the first millennium CE have profound consequences for (much) later developments in different parts of Eurasia, above all the (Second) 'Great Divergence' between modern 'western' technological and economic progress and consequent global dominance on the one hand and more traditional conditions elsewhere? At first sight, the idea of linking ancient history to much more recent events would seem to put us in the camp of scholars who seek the root causes of western modernity in the more distant past, and to distance us from the rival school of thought that prefers to explain eventual western dominance with reference to relatively recent developments. However, to take just one particularly well-known example, Kenneth Pomeranz's thesis that European colonization of the Americas together with the ready availability of coal in England accounted for the West's breakthrough raises the question of why Europeans rather than China gained access to the resources of the New World, which in turn invites examination of the logical relationships between universal empire, political fragmentation, and overseas exploration and settlement.[48] Even 'short-term' explanations may ultimately be embedded in 'long-term' trajectories such as the character of state formation. This adds considerable weight to the question of how the presence or absence of a near-monopolistic super-state shaped the preconditions for modern economic growth and levels of well-being.[49]

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[48] Pomeranz 2006. Cf. Dreyer 2007 for valuable insights into the ways in which imperial China's overseas ventures differed from later European endeavors, and Klein 2007 for comparable constraints on Roman exploration. Stanford 2008c will consider this further.

[49] Jones 2003, esp. chapters 6-7, considers the benefits of post-ancient European polycentricity and the nation state. For a critical appraisal of the consequences of China's unity, see now Hui forthcoming.

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