

STATE, ECONOMY AND THE GREAT DIVERGENCE

GREAT BRITAIN AND CHINA, 1680s–1850s

Peer Vries

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*I want to dedicate the book to the memory of John F. Richards,
a great scholar and a great person*

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PREFACE

A year and three months before I finished this manuscript, I finished another one, entitled *Escaping Poverty. The Origins of Modern Economic Growth* (Vienna and Göttingen, 2013), which also appeared in German as *Ursprünge des modernen Wirtschaftswachstums. England, China und die Welt in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen, 2013). That book dealt extensively with the origins of modern economic growth and thus also with the Great Divergence and the role of the state in it. Inevitably, Great Britain and China and their states were also discussed in that book. In this book I explicitly and exclusively focus on the role of the British and Chinese states, but of course build upon earlier work, in particular on Part Two Chapters 10, 12, 16 and 20–6 and the chapter ‘Why Not China?’ of my *Escaping Poverty* and, when it comes to public finances in Great Britain and China, on my ‘Die Staatsfinanzen Chinas und Großbritanniens im langen 18. Jahrhundert. Ein Vergleich’ in Peter Rauscher, Andrea Serles and Thomas Winkelbauer (eds), *Das ‘Blut des Staatskörpers’. Forschungen zur Finanzgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit, Historische Zeitschrift. Beiheft 56* (Munich, 2012), 209–57. (This article has also been published, in English, as a working paper (no. 167/12) on the website of the Department of Economic History at the London School of Economics and Political Science: <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/workingPapers/economicHistory/home.aspx>.) A certain overlap with previous work, which I refer to in the Bibliography, was inevitable, but I considered it more efficient, for myself and the reader, and better for the flow of the arguments in the book, to not repeatedly refer to older texts but to partially include or paraphrase them, often with adaptations and changes. But at a time when one can be accused of ‘auto-plagiarism’, it may not be superfluous to acknowledge that one as an author of course builds upon previous work. I had already finished my manuscript when I read Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (New York, 2014), so I could not integrate its findings and claims in my manuscript. I do, however, want to point out that in that publication too the author time and again emphasizes the fundamental role of active state intervention in the Great Divergence. According to Beckert that divergence and more in general the ‘rise of the West’ simply cannot be explained without reference to the state and its intervention in and manipulation of the economy, or to the coercion and violence endorsed or even actively used by that same state.

INTRODUCTION

Perfect markets are for the poor.

Erik S. Reinert, *How Rich Countries Got Rich ... and Why Poor Countries Stay Poor*, 18

One of the most lively and interesting debates in global economic history is that on ‘the Great Divergence’, that is the emergence of a huge gap in the levels of wealth, development and growth between various parts of the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹ In that debate, comparisons between Western Europe – in particular Great Britain – and China play a prominent role. Why did Great Britain first industrialize instead of China? Why did Great Britain not develop like China? The fact that such questions have stirred up such an ongoing and fertile debate is a clear sign that in Western historiography over the last decades the image of China in the early modern era, that is roughly from the late fifteenth century to the first decades of the nineteenth century, has gone through some radical changes. In economic history, the field that I will concentrate on in this text, many authors no longer picture China during the high Qing² as a completely different – that is, at least as compared to the Western world – underdeveloped and poor part of the world. They now, in contrast, emphasize that looking at China and the West at that time they see ‘a world of surprising resemblances.’³ This so-called ‘Eurasian similarity-thesis’, to use an expression by Perdue, and the accompanying tendency ‘to transcend the hoary insistence on East-West dichotomies’ have become quite popular.⁴ The American sociologist and historian Goldstone even coined a term, ‘the California School’, to refer to a growing group of scholars who claim that in the early modern era levels of wealth, development and growth at the two extremes of Eurasia were quite similar and that the supposedly unique character of Western society at the time to a very large extent is only a figment of the imagination of Eurocentric historians.⁵ Some revisionists, like Frank, Hobson and Marks, go even further and claim that Europe as compared to East Asia in the early modern era has to be considered ‘backward.’⁶

¹The term became popular thanks to Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*.

²The Qing ruled China from 1644 to 1911. The period of the High Qing runs from the 1680s to the end of the eighteenth century.

³This now popular expression actually is the title of the first part of Pomeranz’s *Great Divergence*.

⁴For the Eurasian similarity-thesis see Perdue, *China Marches West*, 536–42. This wish to transcend ‘dichotomies’ also figures in recent publications by Goody (even somewhat obsessively), by Lieberman and much more even-handedly in Darwin’s *After Tamerlane*. I refer to the Bibliography. For the expression ‘hoary insistence on East-West dichotomies’ see Lieberman, *Beyond binary histories*, the backflap.

⁵For the California School, its members and ideas see my ‘California School and beyond’.

⁶See for their publications the bibliography.

State, Economy and the Great Divergence

Serious scholarly attention to the economic history of Ming (1368–1644) and Qing China was long overdue in Western historiography. For too long prejudiced clichés had abounded. In the new and booming field of global economic history, China deserved not only serious study but clearly also some rehabilitation. The negative, primitive image of China that was reproduced time and again, especially by people who hardly knew anything about China's imperial past, definitely needed correcting. But I am afraid that, as is so often the case in scholarship, a tendency has emerged to err in the opposite direction. The healthy wish to break with a tradition of focusing almost exclusively and even somewhat obsessively on what 'the East' lacked in contrast to 'the West', must not, as now often is the case, lead us to ignore major differences that *did* exist. Scholars who systematically focus only on the similarities between Western Europe and China, in the end will be more or less forced to explain the undeniable Great Divergence of the nineteenth century by referring to 'contingency', 'accident', 'fortuitous circumstances' and the like, as indeed many of them do.⁷ Personally, I don't think that is a very satisfactory way of explaining major historical divergences. Although undoubtedly contingency plays a big role in history, explaining major transformations normally implies referring to major underlying conditions. In the case of major *persistent* divergences, that normally means major differences in initial conditions.⁸ I recently published a book, *Escaping Poverty* that tried to provide an overall analysis of the emergence and possible explanations of the Great Divergence. The underlying goal of this text is to point at one such specific major difference that very well *may* have been an important cause of the Great Divergence.

The importance, role and function of the state: The cases of Great Britain and China

That really major difference would be the importance, role and function of the state. In studying the Great Divergence, as in many other fields of global history, it has become increasingly popular to no longer take states and their territories as point of departure and as obvious 'setting' for one's analysis. In many fields of study there indeed exist good reasons to stop doing so. There also, though, exist good reasons to not err in the opposite direction, as now happens in many texts on global history, and almost completely ignore the state. In a study like this, where one wants to investigate what exactly were the characteristics of various states and how they impacted on economic development, one evidently and by necessity *has* to take existing states as basic unity of analysis. To find out things about states one has to study states.

What I intend to do in this text, is to show how fundamentally *different* Great Britain (and, more in general, Western Europe) and China were in these respects. My reason

⁷See for a great number of examples my *Escaping Poverty*, 53–5.

⁸See for further explanation my *Escaping Poverty*, 44–53.

for ‘only’ focusing on Great Britain and China is that I am convinced that using a simple dichotomy of ‘the West’ versus ‘the Rest’ normally obscures more than it helps to explain. My thesis is that when it comes to the way in which the state impinged on economic life in these extremes of Eurasia, it is not surprising *resemblances* but surprising *differences* that catch the eye. Geographically, the focus of the text will be on Great Britain that clearly has its idiosyncrasies but will also refer quite regularly to other western European states to show how exceptional *or* non-exceptional that British case is. Chronologically, my analysis will focus on what one could call ‘the very long eighteenth century’. For Great Britain that would be the period from 1688, when with the Glorious Revolution many important changes in the organization of the British state were either introduced or institutionalized, to 1849, when with the formal repeal of the Navigation Acts a new era in British economic policy started.⁹ For Qing China the period discussed will be from the 1680s when, with the end of the Three Feudatories War, the Qing dynasty began to effectively rule over the whole of mainland China, and on top of that incorporated Taiwan, to the 1840s, when with the First Opium War (1839–42) China was ‘opened’ and a fundamentally new phase in its economic history began. My focus on Great Britain during the very long eighteenth century needs no further explanation: that is the period in which the country took off and became the world’s first industrial nation. For China my periodization is far less obvious. I choose the period of Qing rule to the Opium Wars basically because that is the period that up until now has been discussed by virtually all the participants in the debate on the Great Divergence and that is the debate that I want to analyse, interpret and evaluate from the perspective of the role of the state. It may very well be true that actually China came closer to taking off under Song rule (960–1279) than it ever did under the Qing, but systematic comparisons between that period and Europe in the early modern era are still extremely scarce, which means that I as yet lack sufficient material for writing a book like this focusing on Song China.¹⁰

For me the Great Divergence is caused by the emergence of modern economic growth in a specific part of the world and its absence in the rest of it. In my *Escaping Poverty* I have extensively discussed the specific characteristics of modern economic growth and its overall causes. Doing that again in this book would just become repetitive. I will here explicitly focus on the role the state may have played in the emergence of such growth in Great Britain and in its non-emergence in China during the very long eighteenth century. This is the first study in which these two polities are systematically compared from this angle. Therefore the bulk of my research had to be devoted to charting similarities and differences, which left me less room for

⁹See for the debate on continuity versus discontinuity in a strictly institutional sense: Braddick, *Nerves of the State*; He, *Paths toward the Modern Fiscal State*, ch. 2; O’Brien, ‘Fiscal exceptionalism’; Stasavage, *Public Debt*, and Sussman and Yafeh, ‘Institutional reforms’. For a recent general interpretation of ‘1688’, that emphasizes how *revolutionary* it was, see Pincus, 1688. In recent publications by North, Wallis and Weingast and by Acemoglu and Robinson, the Glorious Revolution is presented as an event of world-historical dimensions. See the Bibliography.

¹⁰See, for the thesis that Song China would have been more advanced economically than Qing China, Deng, ‘Demystifying growth’; Jones, *Growth Recurring*, 73–84, and Liu, *Wrestling for Power*.

the question of what all these similarities and differences might imply. Many of their effects are quite obvious. In some respects, however, determining their *exact* effects would require a separate new and extensive analysis – here I can only suggest the main questions it should deal with.

Considering the fact that Qing China is a huge continent, whereas Great Britain is only a medium-sized state, a critic might point out that my comparison does not make sense and that I should compare Europe or at least Western Europe to China. I nevertheless decided to focus on (Great) Britain. I did so for several reasons. First because even ‘Western Europe’ in this context would not always be a very useful category as in various respects there existed substantial differences between states in that part of the world. Even if Great Britain might in several respects be regarded as a typical Western European state, although almost always in some extreme sense, in other respects it clearly was exceptional. It, moreover, was the first and in many respects for a couple of decades, the *only* major industrial nation. This book is definitely not meant as the umpteenth Whiggish effort to defend the ‘peculiarity of the British’, but, as the text will show, in various respects Britain indeed *was* different, sometimes even *very* different. To simply proceed as if there was such a thing as ‘*the* (Western) European state’ during the early modern era would be, as we will see time and again, seriously misleading.¹¹ A clear convergence of different models of state-formation only became apparent *after* the French Revolution and its impact; before that there were striking varieties. Charles Tilly (1929–2008), one of the major specialists in the study of state-formation, actually set out to answer the following question: ‘What accounts for the great variation [*sic*] over time and space in the kinds of state that have prevailed in Europe since AD 990?’¹² In the early modern era ‘the western European state’ did not (yet) exist. It is mistaken to speak in such terms not just because quite substantial differences existed between various polities, but also because they were engaged in almost permanent competition and, quite often, even wars with one another. Europe’s history in the early modern era was characterized by permanent wars in which Europeans fought Europeans. Millions of Europeans were killed by other Europeans. Let me only give one, it being the worst example: ‘During the Napoleonic period, France alone counted close to a million war deaths. ... The toll across Europe may have reached as high as five million deaths.’¹³ In that respect Europe clearly was a collection of very distinct, different and competing, even combative entities. I will, nevertheless, often refer to other European states to broaden my comparison and to show that notwithstanding the substantial differences between states in Western Europe that I just alluded to, it can *in some respects* indeed make sense to compare China with Western Europe *as a whole*. For the staggering amount of literature in which one can read

¹¹See Appendix A for literature that discusses in what respects Great Britain was different from other (Western) European countries and in what respects it was not.

¹²See the flap of Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*. Compare Epstein: ‘One of the most historically pregnant aspects of pre-modern Europe was its variety of political types, and the fact that economic leadership did not stay with one type of regime or country for very long’. Epstein, ‘Rise of the West’, 252.

¹³Bell, *First Total War*, 7.

about the differences and similarities between states in Europe during the early modern era I refer to the bibliography.¹⁴

That of course does not exclude that many of these competing and fighting European states may have been quite similar. One may even, with Tilly, claim that this competition, that very often implied emulation and the borrowing of best practices of the states in the state system, was the main reason that *in the end* their state structures became more and more similar. As competing parts of one state system they were constantly watching, analysing and emulating each other. Governments and many subjects were very keen on figuring out the relative strength and potential of their countries and they definitely would have grasped the logic and value of the comparative analyses that I present here. It was quite normal to compare the economic, political and military systems of various 'Great Powers' and to then try and learn from these comparisons and adopt best practices. The history of early modern Europe is a history of competing states that permanently benchmark, borrow, imitate and emulate.¹⁵ Britain, France, the Dutch Republic, 'Germany', 'Italy', Portugal and Spain, for example, all clearly were part of a (Western) European state system and in the end this indeed had 'equalizing' effects on their state structures. But that did not mean they had similar histories: differences at times were enormous, depending, for example, on how one organized for competition and on whether one was successful or not. Being part of the European state system, to focus on what is at stake in this book, in any case did not imply *ipso facto* that the economic history of a state and its level of development and wealth would be similar to that of the other states in that same system. One need only compare Spain and Portugal on the one hand with Great Britain and the Dutch Republic on the other. Many economic historians would claim that the differences between these European states, in, for example, terms of wealth may have been bigger than those between say Great Britain and the Dutch Republic on the one hand and China on the other hand. So one would be well advised to not look at states in Europe in isolation but also be cautious to not exaggerate and 'standardize' the impact of Europe's state system. One should in any case be wary of undifferentiated references to the assumedly 'salutary' effects of the European or Western state system and its plurality on 'Europe' or 'the West'.

In this context I think it is also important to point out that states in early modern Western Europe in many respects were much more 'porous' than they were to become

¹⁴See for example: Black, *Kings, Nobles & Commoners*; Blockmans, *History of Power*; Downing, *Military Revolution*; Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan*; Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, and Tilly and Blockmans, *Cities & the Rise of States in Europe*. Finer, *History of Government* provides a brilliant global analysis of systems of government from the ancient monarchies and empires to the coming of modern states. For information with regard to the fiscal-military state that will figure so prominently in my text, I refer to, in alphabetical order: Bonney, *Economic Systems and State Finance*; Bonney, *Rise of the Fiscal State*; Cavaciocchi, *Fiscalità nell'economia europea*; Cardoso and Lains, *Paying for the Liberal State*; Conway and Torres, *Spending of States*; Dincecco, *Political Transformations*; Karaman and Pamuk, 'Ottoman state finances'; O'Brien and Yun, *Rise of Fiscal States*; Rauscher, Serles and Winkelbauer, *Blut des Staatskörpers*; Storrs, *Fiscal-Military State*, and Torres Sánchez, *War, State and Development*.

¹⁵See, e.g. Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*; Sophus Reinert, *Translating Empire* and 'Rivalry'; Scott, 'Fiscal-military state' and the literature about mercantilism referred to in Chapter 6 notes 2–11.

in the nineteenth century after the French Revolution, when rulers were resolved to have a more exclusive grip on their people and resources and the distinction between domestic/national and foreign became much strictly defined and enforced. Their armies and the personnel of their navies could to a very large extent consist of foreigners, as could the people who worked for their chartered companies. Very often their rulers were foreigners too.¹⁶ The highest layers of the aristocracy were quite transnational. Foreign merchants were present in great numbers in every important trading centre.¹⁷ Moreover, there already existed something like international finance. Financiers from the Dutch Republic, for example, subscribed to British public debt, while in 1764 and 1774 investors from that same country held over 30 per cent of stocks of the English East India Company.¹⁸ In monetary matters, too, borders still could be quite porous. Foreign coin could be an important element in local currency, particularly when there was little local coinage produced or when a small-scale issuer bordered a more prolific and important neighbour. In Ireland, English, Scottish and other foreign coins, mostly Spanish issues, were used; in Russia one used Western coins, in Poland coins from Sweden and Saxony.¹⁹ In many respects European states in the early modern era still were quite distinct from modern states, as they became the 'norm' during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁰

The text will consist of eight chapters. It opens with a long introduction, providing some historiographical background, methodological comments and caveats, and some basic empirical information. Then there are four chapters that deal with the 'hardware' or 'infrastructure' of the British and Chinese states, with many references to other European countries. Here revenue (over-)expenditure, finance and money, and personnel are discussed. The final four chapters are dedicated to the military and the economy, economic policies, economy and empire and finally to state- and nation-building. A large part of my text will be quite descriptive, as I think it is very important to try and determine *precisely* and where possible *in quantitative terms* how big and fundamental the differences between Britain – and other European countries – and China actually were. So many different views are presented about the role of the state in the rise of the West, especially in 'grand narratives', and so many of these views have so little solid empirical underpinnings that an endeavour to find out 'how it actually was' is long overdue and highly relevant. I hope to show beyond reasonable doubt that any serious

¹⁶For foreigners in (Great) Britain's army, navy and chartered companies see e.g. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates & Sovereigns*, 29, table 2.1, here reprinted on page 279 and Chapter 4 notes 92–3. Europe's aristocracy almost by definition was transnational. For the period 1689 to 1702, Britain and the Dutch Republic had the same ruler, the man who became known as William III, King of Britain.

¹⁷For foreign merchants/bankers in London see e.g. Chapman, *Merchant Enterprise*, and more specifically for the period of the Napoleonic Wars, Beerbühl, 'Supplying the belligerent countries'.

¹⁸For Dutch subscribers to British public debt, see Van Zanden and Van Riel, *Strictures of Inheritance*, 99, table 1.3. For foreign capital and capitalists going to Great Britain, see also Cassis, *Capitals of Capital*, ch. 1; Knight, *Britain against Napoleon*, ch. 13, and O'Brien, 'Contributions of warfare'. For Dutch investors in the English East India Company, see Bowen, *Business of Empire*, 112.

¹⁹Eagleton and Williams, *Money*, 167.

²⁰See for some further comments pages 40–51.

analysis of the causes of the Great Divergence must pay attention to these differences. The impact of these differences – in other words, an analysis of what differences these differences may have made – will be briefly discussed in the conclusion. I really want to emphasize the importance of description in this text. One should first describe a state of affairs as precisely as possible, which as will become evident in this text already is quite an endeavour, before one makes assertions about its impact. In this text I will primarily refer to publications in English and try to show ‘the state of the art’ with regard to my topic in Western scholarship. It would be very interesting to confront that with the state-of-the-art expertise, as it exists in China.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION: TRADITIONAL VIEWS AND ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The persistence of the traditional view: Britain as an emerging free-trade economy

Many readers probably will be surprised by my intention to show that the differences between early modern China and Western Europe, when it comes to the importance, role and function of the state in the economy, were big and deserve close scrutiny. Have these differences not always figured very prominently in studies of ‘the rise of the West’ and ‘the decline of the East’ in the early modern era? Have not numerous scholars always emphasized the contrast between the state of early modern and especially industrializing Britain that was supposed to become ever leaner and cleaner till it only functioned as a kind of night-watchman and China’s ‘oriental despotism’? Whom am I trying to convince of what? To make that clear, I have to start my text with a historiographical introduction in which I briefly present ‘traditional’ and ‘alternative’ views on the topic of my research.

Adam Smith (1723–90) is claimed to have said: ‘Little else is required to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism, but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice.’²¹ His impact has been enormous, even, as so often is the case, among people who have never read a word of his texts. Many scholars have claimed – and many still do – that Smith’s ideas with regard to the role of the state in economic development – i.e. *as they interpreted them* – were correct. Many scholars have defended the thesis that the history of the rise of the West, first and foremost that of Britain, the first industrial nation – again, *in their interpretation* of his ideas – has proved that Smith was right. In their opinion the West rose *when* and *because* Western rulers took Smith’s frowning on state intervention and mercantilism very seriously.²² Let

²¹This is claimed by Adam Smith’s friend Dugald Stewart. See Hall, ‘States and economic development’, 154.

²²Smith was *not* always taken seriously by his contemporaries and even for quite some time after his death. In particular not when it came to his ideas about free trade. See, e.g. Magnusson, *Nation, State and the Industrial Revolution*, 14–15.

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us not debate what Smith actually said,²³ but deal with what ‘Smithians’, his latter-day adherents, think about growth in general and the rise of the West in particular, focusing on the role of the state. One can discuss what exactly Smith wants the state to do and abstain from doing *in practice*. But it is clear that *in principle* he, and his followers, want to confine its role to creating and sustaining the circumstances in which the market can function as a well-oiled mechanism. The economic function of the state would be to ‘serve’ the market. In their view, it implies that government should create and sustain free and fair competition, so that the invisible hand can do its work. That in any case means it has to take care of defence, a system of transparent and efficient law and law enforcement – in particular when it comes to protecting property rights – and of the necessary material and institutional infrastructure that private enterprise cannot profitably provide for itself. What it should in any case abstain from is *intervening* in the market, allowing monopolies to exist or even creating them, and protecting and supporting certain producers and consumers against fair competition. In brief, all the things that Smith detested in the ‘mercantile system’ of his times.

In the ‘Smithian’ interpretation of British economic history, that fits in quite neatly with the Whig interpretation of Britain’s overall history, the primacy of Britain and its industrialization are by and large regarded as the culmination of a long process in which Britain’s economy increasingly became characterized by free and fair competition and in which government increasingly tended to behave according to ‘Smithian’ logics. The following quote by Arnold Toynbee, who coined the expression ‘Industrial Revolution’ in the 1880s, puts it very neatly:

The essence of the Industrial Revolution is the substitution of competition for the medieval regulations which had previously controlled the production and distribution of wealth.²⁴

Some hundred years later this view was still quite popular, as is shown in this quote by Rosenberg and Birdzell in their book about how the West grew rich:

Between 1750 and 1880, the respect of Western governments for the autonomy of the economic sphere became virtually an ideology. Apart from such sporadic

²³There are at least two elements in Smith’s work that are not very ‘Smithian’, in the sense that the bulk of the people who claim they stand in his tradition would *not* endorse them. The first one is illustrated most clearly in the fact that Smith did *not* oppose the Navigation Acts. He thinks they were ‘not favourable to foreign commerce, or the growth of that opulence which can arise from it’ but nevertheless calls some of the regulations ‘as wise ... as if they had been dictated by the most deliberate wisdom’ and explicitly indicates why: ‘As defence, however, is of much more importance than opulence, the Act of Navigation is, perhaps, the wisest of all the commercial regulations of England.’ Smith, *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes*, 464–5. Please note that Smith explicitly refers to ‘nations’ in the title of his book and claims that ‘the great object of the political economy of every nation is to increase the riches and power [*sic*] of that country’. Ibid., 372. The second element is that Smith held the view that sustained, substantial economic growth is impossible, in particular in a situation where population increases. See for an analysis of this element in Smith’s work Wrigley, ‘Classical economists’.

²⁴Toynbee, *Toynbee’s Industrial Revolution*, 58. This basically is also the thesis defended in Polanyi, *Great Transformation*.

intrusions as the British Factory Acts and Bismarck's system of social insurance, governments were content to assist only when asked.²⁵

McNeill wrote about the wealth and dynamism of 'such conspicuously undergoverned lands as Holland and England', claiming that welfare and warfare are bad for economic development.²⁶ This idea, that economic growth and the Industrial Revolution as a special case of economic growth in the end can best be explained by reference to 'the market', is still predominant, in particular with the wider public.

Of course, one finds all kinds of nuances and adaptations and, especially in British 'Whig historiography', a long tradition that focuses on British 'exceptionalism' and its claim that Great Britain had been quite different from the rest of Europe from quite early on and had shown the rest of Europe how best to modernize. However that may be, the view that in the end more than anything else it was the market mechanism that lay at the root of economic primacy and predominance of the West has always been and still is very popular.²⁷ Let me give a couple of examples and start with Eric Jones's claim that: 'Economic history may be thought of as a struggle between a propensity for growth and one for rent-seeking.'²⁸ According to him, in premodern states, and in most modern ones too, 'politics mean rent-seeking or pie-slicing behaviour.'²⁹ I guess this means, that the market, if left to itself, would be the ideal mechanism to create growth. An almost perfect and apparently extremely appealing example of this line of reasoning is provided by Landes' bestseller *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*.³⁰ His explanation of why Western Europe, or rather Protestant Western Europe, and first and foremost Protestant *Britain*, industrialized is multifaceted. But his view on the role of the state in the process is quite outspoken, as shown in his extensive, separate discussion of why Britain became the first industrial nation. According to him, that could only happen because its government ensured that the market functioned as free and 'thus' as efficiently as possible.³¹ He places the market at the heart of 'European exceptionalism'. When he wonders what was at the basis of the European cultivation of invention, that in his view was uniquely European and the main precondition for industrialization, he concludes:

In the final analysis ... I would stress the market. Enterprise was free in Europe. Innovation worked and paid and rulers and vested interests were limited in their ability to prevent or discourage innovation.³²

²⁵Rosenberg and Birdzell, *How the West Grew Rich*, 145.

²⁶McNeill, *Global Condition*, 122.

²⁷See for just some examples Baechler, Hall and Mann, *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism*; Bernstein, *Birth of Plenty*; Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies*; Ferguson, *Civilization*; Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book*; Hall, *Powers & Liberties*; Jay, *Road to Riches*; Jones, *European Miracle*; idem, *Growth Recurring*; Landes, *Wealth and Poverty*; Macfarlane, *Riddle of the Modern World*; idem, *Invention of the Modern World*; Powelson, *Centuries of Economic Endeavor*; Ringmar, *Why Europe was First*; Rosenberg and Birdzell, *How the West Grew Rich*.

²⁸Jones, *Growth Recurring*, 1.

²⁹Jones, *Growth Recurring*, 47.

³⁰Landes, *Wealth and Poverty*.

³¹Landes, *Wealth and Poverty*, ch. 15.

³²Landes, *Wealth and Poverty*, 59.

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In his view, too, the function of government is to create and sustain the preconditions that enable the ‘invisible hand’ to do its job.

We still find this classical mainstream economist’s view that the ‘rise of the West’ in general and of Great Britain in particular equalled the rise of the market and the dismantling of what Adam Smith called the ‘mercantile system’. This is what John Nye wrote about this system:

When one factors in deadweight inefficiencies of high taxation and large government with the cost of administering and defending the colonial empire, it is likely on both theoretical and empirical grounds that such large-scale expansion was on net, costly to the nation.³³

In his view Great Britain would have been better off without its intervening and interventionist state:

Absent a theoretically sound economic argument about the ways in which empire promoted overall economic development, accompanied by appropriate empirical evidence, the economists’ presumption that such intervention is globally ineffective should be seen as decisive. At best it might be argued that the nature of political incentives was such that no more efficient policy was feasible. But that is simply an observation about the ways in which politics constrained productive behaviour; in which case it becomes even more interesting to ask how Britain developed *despite* [italics in original] such inefficient interventions.³⁴

Deirdre McCloskey is very outspoken and quite unrestrictedly opposes the idea that mercantilism and its fiscal-military state apparatus might have had major positive effects for Great Britain’s economy. Everyone who thinks otherwise, including all the contemporaries, is simply mistaken: ‘[P]eople *thought* that mercantilist aggression was good for them. ... But it is not sound, then or now, whatever people believe.’³⁵ In her words, ‘No ceaseless struggle for survival, prosperity, and predominance backed by ships and men and money, by jingo, explains British economic success, now or in 1792 or in 1790. Innovation enabled by bourgeois dignity and liberty does.’³⁶ The suggestion that imperialism may have had a positive role in helping trade and so in helping industrialization, in her view, implies the counterfactual that a ‘*pacif and free trade Britain would not* [italics added] have benefited from European engagement with the rest of the world’. Which she thinks is ‘an odd assumption, since European places like Denmark did benefit, with trivial overseas colonies. Sweden and Germany and Austria benefitted, with few or none.’³⁷ Great Britain’s economy in her view could have done just

³³Nye, *War, Wine, and Taxes*, 24.

³⁴Nye, *War, Wine, and Taxes*, 24 and 25. See also the quotation on page 427.

³⁵McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity*, 215.

³⁶McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity*, 216.

³⁷McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity*, 223–4.

as well with much less military effort and expenses and much less mercantilism, as shows in the following quotes:

A Britain with a little Tudor-style navy devoted to coastal defence would have remained independent for a long time ...

A Quaker United Kingdom ... would have gotten the same prices and opportunities as the actual Britain, allowing for the transshipment costs through Amsterdam or Le Havre.

... if Manchester had been the right place to spin cotton before the invention of air conditioning, then European events would have put it there, regardless of whether Britain won at Plassey or Québec or Trafalgar or Waterloo.³⁸

We will of course come back to Great Britain's mercantilism and fiscal-militarism time and again in this book. Here I will confine myself to saying that I consider these claims extremely naïve. In my view they completely ignore the harsh realities of 'competition' in the early modern world.

Joel Mokyr in his book on the economic history of Britain from 1700 to 1850 explains much of its development and growth by the fact that 'by the time of the ascent of Queen Victoria to the throne', the country had become 'as much of a laissez-faire economy as can be expected on this earth' and that rent seeking there 'was approaching extinction'. For him the transition to the free market, 'the mother of all institutional changes', is a necessary precondition for economic growth to become 'the norm rather than the exception'.³⁹ He clearly rejects the thesis that Great Britain's fiscal-military state would have had a positive impact in this respect: 'Some scholars seem to forget that the huge expenses of the Hanoverian foreign wars were costs, not benefits,' and claims there perhaps is a certain 'naïveté' of supposing that the eighteenth-century state provided public goods 'such as infrastructural investments and national defence'.⁴⁰ The state primarily did one thing: waging wars and raising the revenue to pay for them. Its other main activity, according to Mokyr, was redistributing wealth and income.⁴¹ As an expert in British economic history, he of course knows and admits that 'before the end of the eighteenth century, Britain remained on the whole committed to protectionist and mercantilist doctrines', but claims that, 'after 1815 the new liberalism was slowly gaining ground'.⁴² On the eve of the Industrial Revolution, therefore, according to him, Britain still in many ways was 'a protectionist and regulated economy', in which growth took place 'despite rather

³⁸For these three quotes see McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity*, 224–5.

³⁹All these quotes are from page 8 of his *Enlightened Economy*. This thesis is defended throughout the book.

⁴⁰Mokyr, *Enlightened Economy*, 159 and 392. Mokyr himself seems to forget that someone's costs are someone else's income.

⁴¹Mokyr, *Enlightened Economy*, 392.

⁴²Mokyr, *Enlightened Economy*, 153.

than *because* of the institutional preconditions.⁴³ It nevertheless was ‘better situated and equipped by comparison’ than other European nations.⁴⁴ One may synthesize his view in the claim that Britain’s economy in the very long eighteenth century initially developed and grew *notwithstanding* mercantilism, only to develop and grow faster once mercantilism had disappeared.⁴⁵ According to him, ‘It is the changing balance between wars and the provision of public goods that is at the heart of the economics of the public sector in Britain between 1700 and 1850.’⁴⁶

This ‘classic’ story of how the West grew rich has always been underpinned by the fundamental tenet of classical or neoclassical mainstream economics that the invisible hand of free and perfect competition would be a guarantee for economic success. In the last couple of decades, the so-called ‘new institutional economics’ is having a substantial impact on Western economic thought. This impact can also be traced in economic history, although economic historians of course have always continued to be much more aware of the role of institutions than most ‘hard-core’ economists. Douglass North, the main exponent of new institutional economics, has been very active as an economic historian and has published widely on the rise of the West and on Britain’s economic development.⁴⁷ His ideas and those of his co-authors and supporters therefore have to be taken on board in my analysis. It will not come as a surprise that he claims that this rise was caused by more efficient Western economic institutions. In all of his work an almost direct and, in any case, very smooth connection is assumed between the right institutions, economic development and economic growth including industrialization. There tends to be a heavy emphasis on the development of well-described and state-enforced property rights. Having described how – in their view – England after 1688 acquired an efficient system of property rights (including a patent law that implied private property in knowledge), North and his co-author Thomas in 1971 ended their book on the rise of the Western world claiming: ‘The stage was now set for the Industrial Revolution.’⁴⁸ In his *Structure and Change in Economic History*, published in 1981, North claimed that ‘better specified and enforced property rights and increasingly efficient and expanding markets’ are ‘the most convincing explanation for the Industrial Revolution’ in Britain.⁴⁹ In his *Violence and Social Orders* from 2009, a book co-authored with Wallis and Weingast, post-1688 Britain figures as the first society that clearly set itself on the way

⁴³Mokyr, *Enlightened Economy*, 25.

⁴⁴Mokyr, *Enlightened Economy*, 12. See also *ibid.*, 68: ‘None of this is to suggest that Britain had a society perfectly designed for economic growth and technological progress. Yet compared to the rest of Europe, its advantages seem obvious.’

⁴⁵That puts him in a similar position as Nye (page 10) and to some extent Jack Goldstone who wonders: ‘Might it be that modern economies emerged despite, rather than because of, the growth of modern states?’ See Goldstone, ‘A historical, not comparative method’, 270.

⁴⁶Mokyr, *Enlightened Economy*, 392. Figures with regard to public expenditure in my view do not exactly support that claim. See page 185.

⁴⁷I refer the reader to the Bibliography. During his long career North has often and at times fairly drastically changed his opinions. See my *Escaping Poverty*, 120–1, note 335.

⁴⁸North and Thomas, *Rise of the Western World*, 156.

⁴⁹See there, page 166.

to become a so-called ‘open-access-order’ society. Such societies are defined as ‘societies with widespread political participation, the use of elections to select governments, constitutional arrangements to limit and define the powers of government, and unbiased application of the rule of law’.⁵⁰ To reach this stage certain preconditions have to be fulfilled. These so-called ‘doorstep conditions’ are the existence of a rule of formal law for elites, of perpetually lived organizations and of a consolidated control of the military.⁵¹ In a society like post-1688 Britain, rent seeking is eroded and growth promoted. Let me just give a couple of other examples of this institutionalist perspective. For the famous political scientist-economist Mancur Olson, ‘a few decades after stable and nationwide government had been established in Britain [i.e., after 1688], the Industrial Revolution was on its way’.⁵² In their widely acclaimed *Why Nations Fail* Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson repeatedly postulate a *direct* connection between the Glorious and the Industrial Revolution. The dynamics that led to industrialization in their view were ‘unleashed by institutional change that flowed from the Glorious Revolution’.⁵³ Chapter seven of their book, dealing with the Glorious Revolution, is called ‘The turning point: how a political revolution changed institutions in England and led to the Industrial Revolution.’ All one needs for modern economic growth, so it seems, are the right ‘inclusive’ institutions and those emerged in Britain in 1688. The authors distinguish between political institutions and economic institutions and provide the following descriptions.⁵⁴ Inclusive political institutions are institutions that ‘distribute political power widely in a pluralistic manner and are able to achieve some amount of political centralization so as to establish law and order, the foundation of secure property rights and an inclusive market economy’ Inclusive economic institutions are institutions that ‘enforce property rights, create a level playing field, and encourage investments in new technologies and skills.’ Extractive political institutions ‘concentrate power in the hands of a few who will then have incentives to maintain and develop extractive economic institutions for their benefit.’ Extractive economic institutions are ‘structured to extract resources from the many by the few and ... fail to protect property rights or provide incentives for economic activity’.

Institutionalists strongly tend to look on state governments as ‘predators’, or at least, as in Olson’s term, as ‘stationary bandits’ when they are not held in check.⁵⁵ In their view rulers almost without exception must have hindered rather than promoted growth. Economist John Bradford DeLong is so convinced that high taxes and public debts are bad for an economy that he concludes that Great Britain’s industrialization must have been an

⁵⁰See North, Wallis and Weingast, ‘Violence and the rise of open-access orders’, abstract.

⁵¹See their *Violence and Social Orders*, ch. 5.

⁵²Olson, *Rise and Decline*, 128.

⁵³Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 197.

⁵⁴Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 429–30. See for several other, often slightly varying, descriptions under ‘extractive institutions’ and ‘inclusive institutions’.

⁵⁵For Olson’s description of the state as a stationary bandit see his *Power and Prosperity*, under ‘Bandits’. For the claim that states are predatory, see also Bonney, in his introduction to Bonney, *Rise of the Fiscal State*, 4; Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue*, and North, *Structure and Change*.

‘extraordinary event’, due to a ‘fortunate combination of causes’. The country, so he thinks, was simply ‘lucky’.⁵⁶ The first exceptions to this rule of predating emerged in the course of the early modern era in Western Europe. For the rest, if they were not actually hampering growth, most governments are regarded as too indolent, unknowing or ill-equipped to bring it about.⁵⁷ Acemoglu and Robinson stress the fact that the state has to be strong in the sense of having a monopoly on violence.⁵⁸ But apart from that they confine its role to creating and supporting inclusive institutions and ‘facilitating’ market mechanisms. They clearly do not believe a state can successfully implement a developmental strategy. What is lacking so far in most analyses by institutionalist economists are explicit, systematic thoughts on any potential *positive* effects on economic life of proactive, interventionist government policies that are not focusing on ‘getting the prices right’.⁵⁹

The persistence of the traditional view: China as a despotic, ‘oriental’ empire

In the study of the economic history of imperial China too, traditional (i.e. mainly nineteenth-century) perceptions persist. For those who endorse them, the predicament of imperial China, that it did not industrialize, has always been quite easy to explain. They only need to refer to the ‘fact’ that China was characterized by some kind of ‘oriental despotism’. This notion has a long pedigree whose beginnings can be traced back at least to Marco Polo.⁶⁰ In the nineteenth and twentieth century it was ‘elaborated’ and ‘systematised’ to become part and parcel of a scholarly consensus that used it and concepts like ‘hydraulic state’ and ‘Asiatic mode of production’ as obvious explanations of China’s economic underdevelopment.⁶¹ Scholars from different intellectual, national and political backgrounds like Hegel, Mill, or Marx, and to a much lesser extent Weber, contributed to the creating of this negative image.⁶² For the historiography of China it turned out to be very consequential that the founding fathers of historical materialism, Marx and Engels, believed many of these clichés, if they were not actually creating and promoting them. Marx, for example, in a letter dated 2 June 1853, approvingly refers to

⁵⁶Bradford DeLong ‘Overstrong against thyself’, 164–7. According to him Britain’s strong population growth was the most important fact that enabled the country to industrialize because it meant a lower per capita public debt. I fail to see how this can explain industrialization.

⁵⁷See e.g. Jones, *Growth Recurring*, 126 and 132.

⁵⁸See e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 80–1. The political institutions they call ‘inclusive’ are ‘sufficiently centralized and pluralistic’. See there 81.

⁵⁹For clear examples of the influence of new institutionalist thinking among historians see e.g. pages 8–14. That influence is also obvious in Ferguson, *Civilization*, and idem, *Great Degeneration*.

⁶⁰For this idea and other images of China before the Great Divergence see Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*; Rubiés, ‘Oriental despotism’, and Spence, *China’s Great Continent*.

⁶¹See for these concepts Blue, ‘China and Western social thought’, and Hung, ‘Orientalist knowledge’. For a detailed analysis of the Asiatic mode of production, see Brook, *Asiatic Mode of Production*. For the classic description of Oriental despotism see Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*.

⁶²For the view of Weber see Schluchter, *Max Webers Studie über Konfuzianismus und Taoismus*. For the views of Hegel and Marx (and Weber), see Song, *Bedeutung der asiatischen Welt*.

the seventeenth-century author Bernier who had written that ‘in all the various parts of the Orient – he speaks about Turkey, Persia and Hindustan – there was no private property. That is the real key to understanding the Orient.’⁶³ Engels, in a letter to Marx, fully agrees: ‘The lack of property in land indeed is the key to understanding the entire Orient.’⁶⁴ It was not at all self-evident that this would become the dominant image of imperial China. In early modern Europe, in particular during the eighteenth century and especially among enlightened Europeans, the image of China, including its system of rule and its economy, had often been quite positive. In various respects it was even considered as a model for Europe. Voltaire had written about China’s system of government: ‘The human mind certainly cannot imagine a government better than this one.’⁶⁵ In post-Napoleonic Europe such ‘Sinophilia’ became exceptional. A bleak and negative image began to take over to become the almost universally accepted cliché in the second half of that century.⁶⁶

Even now we still find plenty of publications where Qing China is described as ‘despotic,’ ‘absolutist’ and ‘backward’. Interestingly enough, in this respect differences in Western historiography between scholars with more Smithian and scholars with more Marxist leanings have continued to be relatively minor. Like in the nineteenth century, when the traditional negative view of China’s history became dominant, many scholars from *both* ends of the political spectrum still regard the Chinese state under the Qing as despotic or even totalitarian and are convinced that, whatever else it may have been doing, it was *not* promoting growth, let alone capitalism. Many Western scholars still think it was rather the opposite. Landes, to begin with a non-Marxist example, is just as traditional when it comes to describing why ‘the West’ rose as when it comes to describing why ‘the East’ did not. In his work, Qing China appears as a despotic, even totalitarian regime. In his view, Qing China, or rather imperial China during its entire history, was ruled by the elite that opposed invention and innovation, ‘strangled initiative, increased the costs of transaction, diverted talent from commerce and industry’ and that, with its ‘intellectual xenophobia,’ kept the country closed to external influences. It is obvious that he thinks that in all these respects it compared very badly to Western Europe.⁶⁷ Landes is strongly influenced by the views of sinologist Etienne Balazs.⁶⁸ This

⁶³Marx Engels Werke (Berlin 1990) Volume 28, page 254. The translation is mine.

⁶⁴Marx Engels Werke, Volume 28, page 259. The translation is mine. It is striking that Marx and Engels so casually switch from those ‘various parts of the Orient,’ to ‘the Orient’ and even ‘the entire Orient’. For the comments on the situation in China that Marx wrote in the *New York Daily Tribune*, see Torr, *Marx on China*.

⁶⁵I found this quote in Paine, *Sino-Japanese War*, 14–15.

⁶⁶For this seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European ‘Sinophilia,’ see e.g. Maverick, *China. A Model for Europe*. There of course never was an absolute dichotomy with a sharp caesura. See for nuances Jacobsen, ‘Chinese influences or images?’ and Millar, ‘Revisiting the Sinophilia/Sinophobia dichotomy’. Not everyone in the nineteenth century had become negative about imperial China. For positive comments on the country and its economy until way in the second half of the century, see Murphey, *Outsiders*, ch. 9. With the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–5 positive remarks about the Middle Kingdom came to an abrupt end. See Paine, *Sino-Japanese War*, ch. 1.

⁶⁷Landes, *Wealth and Poverty*, 56–7 and 341. For a comparison, or rather juxtaposition, of Europe and China, see chapters 2 and 21.

⁶⁸Balazs, ‘China as a permanently bureaucratic society’ and ‘Birth of capitalism in China’.

scholar has also had a pervasive influence on the man who in the West is often regarded as the most influential historian of the twentieth century, to wit, Fernand Braudel. In his work too, all the classic clichés appear to portray Qing China as ‘unchanged’ and ‘unchanging’ and claim that it had an overpowering, anti-capitalist state apparatus. According to him, in China capitalism was ‘deliberately *thwarted* by the state’ [Italics in the original].⁶⁹ In a popular book from 1989, his colleague Alain Peyrefitte still referred to China as ‘the immobile empire’ and to the British Macartney mission to China in 1792–4 as exemplifying a ‘collision of civilisations’.⁷⁰ In his book on the European miracle Jones approvingly cites this quotation: ‘Property is insecure. In this one phrase the whole history of Asia is contained.’⁷¹ According to Westad, the Qing state ‘aspired to control every aspect of the lives of their subjects.’ He points at the ‘pervasiveness’ of their state and even calls it a ‘police state,’ writing that, ‘their [the Qing’s] immense brutality when threatened had been seen over and again in China for more than 200 years.’⁷² North, Wallis and Weingast in their *Violence and Social Orders* never refer to Qing China but it is quite clear that it would not satisfy their criteria for making the transition to an open-access-order society. Acemoglu and Robinson in their *Why Nations Fail* describe without exception Qing China as ‘absolutist’.⁷³

Marxists as a rule endorse this view. Immanuel Wallerstein in many respects clearly is a *neo*-Marxist, with ideas that go against the grain of orthodox classical Marxism. In his highly influential books on the modern world system, though, he takes all the classic clichés for granted when he explains why empires, of which China in his eyes is a clear example, did not develop the dynamic type of capitalism that according to him emerged in the West in the sixteenth century:

The political centralisation of an empire was at one and the same time its strength and its weakness. Its strength lay in the fact that it guaranteed economic flows from the periphery to the centre by force (tribute and taxation) and by monopolistic advantages in trade. Its weakness lay in the fact that the bureaucracy made necessary by the political structure tended to absorb too much of the profit, especially as repression and exploitation bred revolt which increased military expenditures.⁷⁴

As we will see later on in this text this quotation seriously misrepresents what was going on in Qing China. We even see a similar perspective in the work of Needham, the historian who has done more than anyone else to *change* the perception of China’s history,

⁶⁹Braudel, *History of Civilizations*, part three, ch. 2; idem, *Civilization & Capitalism, II*, 588–9; idem, *Civilization & Capitalism, III*, 520, from where I took the quote. For a critical analysis of Braudel’s ideas on China see Elvin, ‘Braudel and China’.

⁷⁰Peyrefitte, *Empire Immobile*.

⁷¹Jones, *European Miracle*, 165. The quotation, dating from 1925, is from Reade, *Martyrdom of Man*, 108. To be fair to Jones, in the first edition of his *European Miracle* he also had positive things to say about a more ‘pro-active’ state and he has adjusted his perspective in later books like *Growth Recurring*.

⁷²Westad, *Restless Empire*, 8–9, 20 and 50.

⁷³See Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, under ‘China’.

⁷⁴Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, I, 15.

in his specific case the history of science and technology. He was strongly influenced by historical materialism and accordingly blamed the stunted development of science in China on its 'system of bureaucratic feudalism'.⁷⁵

Historians inspired by Marxist thought like Brenner and Isett, Gates or Mazumdar, continue to pay attention to the, in their view very big, differences between China and, in particular, Britain when it comes to their modes of production, their property relations, their agrarian class systems and the role their governments played in guaranteeing or upsetting the existing social order.⁷⁶ Their perception of differences between China's mode of production and that of Britain has been strongly influenced by the work of scholars, first and foremost Huang, who claim that China's economy was dominated by a petty peasant-household mode of production. Huang does not deny that China's economy went through a process of widespread commercialization under the Ming and especially the Qing. But in contrast to Smith and Marx, whose focus on modes of producing he, as such, shares, he thinks that because of the predominance of those peasant households as productive units this at best leads to some growth for some time, but not to development. Commercialization and the extension of the market in such a setting, so he claims, only lead to an intensification of the production process. That implies a consolidation or even a strengthening of the household mode of production instead of its dissolution. This process of intensification is bound to, in the end, lead to decreasing returns to labour inputs, a process he calls 'involution', and thereby to an economic *cul-de-sac*.⁷⁷ In the end, in this view too, China's economy is static and unable to industrialize on its own, being stuck in what Elvin has called its 'high-level equilibrium trap'.⁷⁸ Marxist analyses of various sorts, of course, find ample support in China. The persisting influence of classical Marxist ideas on the history of China, there, for example, clearly shows in the so-called 'sprouts of capitalism debate', a debate that can only be understood against the background of Marx's evolutionary view on history as a fixed succession of modes of production and that therefore focused on finding sprouts of capitalism in 'feudal' China and discovering why these sprouts never fully developed into a new mode of production.⁷⁹ The state, in all these analyses, is seen as a guarantor of the existing mode of production.

Alternative perspectives: Fiscal-militarism and mercantilism in Britain and benevolent agrarian paternalism in China

Considering the massive amount of recent research on the history of Britain as well as China, it is surprising that so many clichés from the nineteenth century continue to

⁷⁵Needham, *Grand Titration*, 197. For information on Needham, see Findlay, 'China, the West, and world history'; and Winchester, *Bomb, Book & Compass*.

⁷⁶Brenner and Isett, 'England's divergence'; Gates, *China's Motor*; Isett, *State, Peasant, and Merchant*, and Mazumdar, *Sugar and Society*.

⁷⁷Huang, *Peasant Economy and Social Change*, and idem, *Peasant Family and Rural Development*.

⁷⁸Elvin, *Pattern of the Chinese Past*, in particular ch. 17, and idem, *Another History*, ch. 2.

⁷⁹See Dirlik, 'Chinese historians'. For an analysis of such 'sprouts of capitalism', see Xu and Wu, *Chinese Capitalism*.

be repeated so un-critically. At least part of the explanation must be, as I have already pointed out, that they fit in so neatly with deeply held convictions of mainstream economists and politicians on what 'good governance' and an 'efficient economy' would look like. The 'Smithian' approach, however, with its focus on the market mechanism, private property and private enterprise, has never had a monopoly among Western scholars interpreting the rise of the West. It always had to compete with a more 'Marxist' approach in which 'primitive accumulation' and 'coercion', at home and abroad, figured prominently. There have always been scholars in whose work the 'visible hand' and thus, by implication, an interventionist state was regarded as a quintessential element in any explanation of the nature and causes of Western wealth. Just think of scholars like Williams, who claimed that talking about British capitalism implies talking about slavery,⁸⁰ or scholars who, to put it in Wallerstein's terms, connected the development of 'the centre' in 'the West' to the underdeveloping of 'peripheries' in 'the Rest'.⁸¹ It was not by accident that Hobsbawm called his book on the social and economic history of Britain between 1750 and 1968 *Industry and Empire*.⁸² When Patrick O'Brien claimed that in the history of Britain there have been inseparable connections between trade, economy, fiscal state and the expansion of empire, he was voicing an opinion that has been held and is still held by many. He also made it clear that one need not be a die-hard Marxist or conspicuously left-wing scholar to hold this view.⁸³ In particular since the publication of John Brewer's *The Sinews of Power*, the thesis that in the 'very long eighteenth century' the impact and role of the state in Britain's economy would have been fairly small has become highly contested. I have the impression that support for contesting views that regard Britain, to put it in Brewer's terms, as a fiscal-military state are on the increase.⁸⁴ In the end, of course, all states might be called fiscal-military, as a state without any economic and coercive means would not be viable. What I refer to here is the specific configuration as it existed in early modern Britain and various other parts of Western Europe, where the state first and foremost was a war machine, absorbing on a systematic basis unheard-of amounts of resources for warfare.⁸⁵ Many authors have begun to analyse British state-formation along lines similar to Brewer, which does not necessarily mean they entirely share his interpretation and evaluation, and often in a

⁸⁰Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*. For a discussion of William's views see Solow and Engerman, *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery*, and Solow, *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System*. For the revival, often in a somewhat mitigated and adapted form, of the Williams thesis see, for example, Blackburn, *Making of New World Slavery*; Blaut, *Colonizer's Model*; Drayton, 'Collaboration of labour'; Frank, in most of his earlier work but also in his *ReOrient*; Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution*, and, with a particular twist, also Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*. See, for example, its introduction. The thesis that Europe 'unfairly' acquired a large part of its wealth on the back of the rest of the world has found ample support in 'textbooks' like Hobson, *Eastern Origins*; Marks, *Origins of the Modern World* and Ponting, *World History*.

⁸¹Wallerstein, *Modern World-System. Four Volumes*.

⁸²Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*.

⁸³O'Brien, 'Inseparable connections'.

⁸⁴Brewer introduces the term in Brewer, *Sinews of Power*, XVII.

⁸⁵For a discussion of the meaning of this term and of various alternatives, see Storrs, 'Fiscal-military state', 2, 9–10, 17, 47–8 and 52, and Torres Sánchez, 'Triumph of the fiscal-military state'.

certain sense have ‘rehabilitated’ mercantilism or rather British mercantilism in doing so. For example, Findlay and O’Rourke in their book on power and plenty are clearly torn between the, in their view, theoretical supremacy of *laissez-faire* economics and the harsh realities of early modern competition. But in the end they more or less willy-nilly conclude that mercantilism and fiscal-militarism must have paid for Great Britain:

Universal free trade would presumably have been even better for Britain than trade with its colonies, based on costly military victories, but this was hardly a realistic alternative during the early modern period. ... To contend that the expenditures and policies of the Hanoverian state that secured this outcome [unalloyed triumph for the British in the European struggle for imperial and politico-military] nevertheless reduced the welfare of the British people seems somewhat academic, and is in any case not provable.⁸⁶

They add that ‘it seems reasonable to conclude that British military success overseas played an important role in explaining why Britain, rather than France, was so successful and precocious an industrializer.’⁸⁷ They basically endorse Ormrod’s view that ‘the limits to growth in the premodern period were determined by geopolitics: by state power and the extent of naval protection available for merchant shipping in distant waters.’⁸⁸ William Ashworth is very explicit and convinced:

If there was a unique English/British pathway of industrialization, it was less a distinct entrepreneurial and technocentric culture than one predominantly defined within an institutional framework spearheaded by the excise and a wall of tariffs.

An industrial policy revolving upon protection and the excise, coupled with the extraordinary rise of lightly taxed or untaxed goods of cotton, iron and pottery, and with rich resources of coal, had put Britain into a seemingly invincible industrial and commercial position.⁸⁹

Elsewhere we find this quotation in which he describes Britain’s industrial development as

less the result of a distinctive indigenous mentality and the gift of mutating ‘natural inquiry’ into mastering nature; instead, it can be argued that it owed more to a policy of nurturing domestic industry behind a wall of tariffs, skill in imitating and subsequently transforming foreign (especially Asian) products, unparalleled exploitation of African slave labour, rich resources of coal, a monopoly of trade

⁸⁶Findlay and O’Rourke, *Power and Plenty*, 351–2.

⁸⁷Findlay and O’Rourke, *Power and Plenty*, 352.

⁸⁸Ormrod, *Rise of Commercial Empires*, 340.

⁸⁹See for these quotations Ashworth, *Customs and Excise*, 379 and 382.

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with British North America, aggressive military prowess and, not least, a relatively efficient body for the collection of inland revenues.⁹⁰

This is a striking, recent comment by Patrick O'Brien:

Our rhetorical and debateable speculation is that in significant respects the First Industrial Revolution can be plausibly represented as a paradigm example of successful mercantilism and that the unintended consequences of the revolution in France [massive long-lasting wars won by Britain] contributed positively and perhaps 'substantially' to its ultimate consolidation and progression.⁹¹

From a quite different background and perspective Prasannan Parthasarathi in his *Why Europe Grew Rich* also comes up with a rather 'positive' interpretation of the effects of mercantilism on Britain's economic development: 'The British path was a coming together of global competitive pressures, ecological shortfalls and a mercantile state.'⁹²

Some social scientists hold similar views. We will see that sociologist-economist Giovanni Arrighi in 2009 in his *Adam Smith in Beijing* (and in 1994 in his *Long Twentieth Century*), in many respects harking back to ideas of Braudel and Wallerstein, assumes a prominent, active role for the state in the Western path of economic development. Political scientists Hobson and Weiss in the 1990s defended the thesis I will defend here, that "strong" states ... are vital for national economic development and industrial transformation.⁹³ Industrializing Great Britain would be a clear example of such a (infrastructurally) strong state. They find support in Michal Mann's publications about the sources of social power. Even some (historical) economists are now rejecting the predominant neoclassical and neo-institutionalist perspectives on the role of the state in economic development.⁹⁴ Ha-joon Chang, Erik and Sophus Reinert are the most outspoken and the ones with the broadest historical perspective, but they certainly are not alone.⁹⁵ Several other economists have published books in which they show the fundamental importance of growth-promoting policies by states, in particular so-called developmental states.⁹⁶ Their critique is fundamental. According to Joe Studwell, founding editor of the *China Economic Quarterly*, mainstream (in his words neoclassical) economics is all but irrelevant when it comes to explaining how the developed countries in

⁹⁰Ashworth, 'Revenue', 1047.

⁹¹See the Conclusion of O'Brien, 'Contribution of warfare'.

⁹²Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich*, 263.

⁹³Weiss and Hobson, *States and Economic Development*, 1.

⁹⁴Differences between those perspectives actually are quite marginal and much smaller than their fundamental similarities.

⁹⁵I refer to the Bibliography for their publications.

⁹⁶Just a personal selection of recent literature, *apart* from the literature directly referred to here: Amsden, *Rise of the 'Rest'*; Johnson, *Japan: Who Governs?*; Lindert, *Growing Public*; Mazzucato, *Entrepreneurial State*; Porter, *Competitive Advantage*; Schwartz, *States versus Markets*; Stanislaw and Yergin, *Commanding Heights*; Wade, *Governing the Market*, and Woo-Cumings, *Developmental State*.

the world actually took off.⁹⁷ In his analysis of development and non-development of Asian economies he claims

there is no significant economy that has developed successfully through policies of free trade and deregulation from the get-go. What has always been required are pro-active interventions.⁹⁸

'Mercantilist' policies, according to him, have played a major role during the industrialization of *all* societies that have taken off so far. No society ever became rich just confiding in *laissez-faire*. That several historians have always known this makes Studwell claim this insight presents 'the victory of the historians' over mainstream economists.⁹⁹

In this context the role of war and violence in economic development is also receiving more attention. It is not by accident that Ronald Findlay and Kevin O'Rourke call their book on trade, war and the world economy in the second millennium *Power and Plenty*. They explicitly posit that 'no history of international trade can ignore the causes or the implications of military exploits.'¹⁰⁰ The greatest expansions of world trade, so they write, have tended 'to come ... from the barrel of a Maxim gun, the edge of a scimitar, or the ferocity of nomadic horsemen', adding that 'For much of our period the pattern of trade can *only* [italics in original] be understood as being the outcome of some military or political equilibrium between contending powers.'¹⁰¹ Some scholars claim, more specifically, that industrialization and growth in Great Britain would be closely and positively connected. In many of his studies about the fiscal-military state O'Brien seems to imply this and in various recent quotes he seems to explicitly endorse this thesis.¹⁰² The quotes by Beckett and Turner and Neal on page 311 also are quite outspoken. The contrast with the traditional claims that wars, and in particular, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, would have crowded out growth in Great Britain could hardly be bigger.¹⁰³ Whatever one may think of these claims, N. A. M. Rodger, I think rightly, admonishes: 'It is surely time that war was ranked as an economic activity of pre-industrial Britain at least equal in importance to agriculture and foreign trade.'¹⁰⁴ He reminds scholars of the fact that 'At a critical early stage in the Industrial Revolution Britain fought a world war lasting almost a quarter of a century' and that 'it seems scarcely credible that the French Wars, which bore at least as heavily on the British economy as the Second World War, had no major economic consequences, or that Britain's economic and military successes were entirely unconnected.'¹⁰⁵ In the

⁹⁷Studwell, *How Asia Works*, e.g. 59–84 and 223–6.

⁹⁸Studwell, *How Asia Works*, 226. The author means interventions by the government.

⁹⁹Studwell, *How Asia Works*, Part Two.

¹⁰⁰Findlay and O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty*, XIX.

¹⁰¹Findlay and O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty*, XVIII and XIX.

¹⁰²See e.g. the quote on page 20.

¹⁰³See page 214.

¹⁰⁴Rodger, 'War as an economic activity', 18.

¹⁰⁵Rodger, 'War as an economic activity', 2 and 17.

social sciences too we see increasing attention to the role of violence in economic life. We will focus in this text on the ideas of Arrighi.¹⁰⁶

Many historians who study early modern Western Europe tend to no longer minimize the impact and active role of the state in the economic history of that part of the world. Even authors like James Bradford DeLong, Niall Ferguson, Jack Goldstone, Deirdre McCloskey, Joel Mokyr or John Nye, who are much less positive about the growth-enhancing potential of mercantilist policies by fiscal-military states, admit that early modern Britain indeed was such a state, at least till the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

Among historians studying Qing China one also finds shifting opinions. Here we see a development in the 'opposite' direction: to wit, a tendency to picture the role of the (Chinese) state as *less* important, which means, in this particular case, less oppressive and less opposed to economic development. The old standard view of China as an 'oriental' society ruled by a despotic elite that was constantly interfering in societal life, including the economy, is becoming less popular. Several scholars were already aware decades ago that imperial China under Ming but especially Qing was not at all suffering under an oriental despotic regime but was rather under-governed.¹⁰⁷ Many scholars no longer believe that the rulers of Qing China were 'anti-trade' and 'anti-traders' and had turned China into a kind of 'command-economy'. What we witness is major shift. As far as I can see, the *dominant* interpretation has now become one in which the policies of China's central government can best be described as a kind of 'agrarian paternalism'.¹⁰⁸ According to this view, China's domestic economy, with its many small producers and consumers, its extremely large number of markets and its substantial level of market integration, basically operated along 'Smithian' lines. China during the long eighteenth century is considered to have been a commercialized market economy – or as Adam Smith would say, 'a commercial society' – with government only interfering in the market mechanism when it feared that 'people's livelihood' was endangered.¹⁰⁹ It is now claimed in the work of Bin Wong, to mention one example among many, that when it comes to economic life, China's government was not erratically despotic but 'benevolent' and quite efficient. It did have a certain agenda and certain priorities, first and foremost agriculture, in which security and wealth of the people prevailed over individual freedom, and it undoubtedly wanted to control or at least monitor and 'manage' certain aspects of public life. But when

¹⁰⁶See e.g. pages 212–16 and 315–17.

¹⁰⁷See Jones, *European Miracle*, second edition, ch. 11, and *Growth Recurring*, ch. 8, for that thesis and for references.

¹⁰⁸Many people held this view before the big change in the European image of China in the nineteenth century. In their view China came much closer to a '*laissez-faire* economy' than Europe. See Gerlach, 'Wu-wei in Europe' and Jacobsen, 'Chinese influences or images?'. For 'agrarian paternalist' interpretations of the Qing state, I refer, in alphabetical order, to Antony and Leonard, *Dragons, Tigers, and Dogs*; Deng, *China's Political Economy*; Dunstan, *State and Merchant and Conflicting Counsels*; Leonard and Watt, *To Achieve Security and Wealth*; Pines, *Everlasting Empire*; Will, 'Chine moderne' and 'Développement quantitatif'; Will and Wong, *Nourish the People*, and, Wong, *China Transformed*; idem, 'Taxation and good governance' and, together with Rosenthal, *Before and beyond Divergence*. The view that Qing China was not a 'totalitarian', 'absolutist', oppressive state but rather 'benevolent' and later on 'weak' has found its way into many 'textbooks'. See e.g. Crossley, *Wobbling Pivot*; Deng, *China's Political Economy*, and Rowe, *China's Last Empire*.

¹⁰⁹For Smith's concept of a commercial society, see Macfarlane, *Riddle of the Modern World*, part II.

its main priorities were not in danger, its economic policy is believed to have normally been one of 'leaving well alone.' Proponents of this view seem to admit that this basically implied a conservative attitude, which was more oriented towards preservation than change. Will admits this strategy, in all probability, would lead to 'quantitative growth' rather than to 'qualitative development', whereas according to Wong, 'The Chinese state aimed for and to some degree achieved its goal of static efficiency; that is, spreading the best techniques available across a vast area.' This goal, according to him, made sense 'in a world of limited possibilities' even though it contrasted with what Europeans wanted 'competition and growth.'¹¹⁰ At times, however, revisionists go further in their claims. Peter Perdue claims: 'The capabilities of the Qing to manage the economy were powerful enough that we might even call it a "developmental agrarian state."¹¹¹ In their *Before and Beyond Divergence*, published in 2011, Rosenthal and Wong write, 'Early modern Chinese political economy was more explicitly intended to foster economic growth than European political economies' and go even as far as claiming 'if there was a state that sponsored economic development anywhere in the eighteenth century, it was the Qing state, not Britain, France or any other European state.'¹¹² In that same book they dedicate an entire chapter (chapter 3) to explaining that China's informal mechanisms would be just as efficient as the formal mechanisms highlighted in stories about Europe's economic rise and indicate, as many scholars do at the moment,¹¹³ that property was far less insecure in China than is always suggested in classic stories about 'oriental despotism'.

An integral part of the standard Western view of the role of China's imperial government in economic life was the conviction that this government preferred to keep China's economy closed to foreign goods and people, especially when they came from the West. No one, of course, has ever denied that China had extensive economic relations with other countries. But the dominant interpretation has long been that (much of) the exchange of goods that did take place between China and other countries should not be regarded as normal 'trade' but rather as 'tribute'.¹¹⁴ Now that supposed difference too is strongly disputed. Many publications dealing with this topic claim that what went by the name of, or under the cover of, 'tribute' often simply was trade.¹¹⁵ That does not mean, though, that the 'tribute system' concept would have completely disappeared. There are several influential scholars who clearly think it refers to an important reality in the history of early modern China.¹¹⁶ The idea that China's imperial government would

¹¹⁰Wong, *China Transformed*, 280.

¹¹¹Perdue, *China Marches West*, 541.

¹¹²See also Wong's recent 'Taxation and good governance'.

¹¹³See pages 64–6.

¹¹⁴See for this classic view Fairbank and Teng, 'On the Ch'ing tributary system'.

¹¹⁵Many scholars no longer believe in the existence of a Chinese tribute system. See, in alphabetical order, Blussé, *Visible Cities*, 11; Millward, *Beyond the Pass*, under 'tribute system'; idem, *Eurasian Crossroads*, 70–4, and Perdue, *China Marches West*, 402. For helpful comments see Deng, 'Foreign staple trade'.

¹¹⁶For a description of the working of the Chinese tribute system by a scholar who does believe it exists, although he is much less outspoken than Fairbank and Teng in contrasting and separating trade from tribute, see the work of Hamashita as compiled by Grove and Selden and his 'Introduction', written together with Arrighi and Selden. See further e.g. Kang, *East Asia before the West*, and Wang, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates*.

constantly interfere in foreign trade is rejected as well. That view is now increasingly regarded as a consequence of the almost exclusive focus on Sino-Western contacts in Western scholarship. A tendency to intervene, supervise and sometimes even control those contacts may indeed have existed. But one should realize that very often there was a wide gap between words – that is official policies – and reality. More importantly, Sino-Western trade was only a (small) part of China's total trade and the rest of that trade is claimed to, overall, have been fairly free from government interference. Again, revisionism is quite radical. According to Roy Bin Wong 'The Chinese state in contrast [i.e. to states in Western Europe,] did little to impede either domestic or foreign trade.'¹¹⁷ He claims 'the Chinese state's policies toward long-distance trade, both domestic and foreign, promoted Smithian growth in ways that exceeded contemporary European practices.' He even goes as far as to suggest that merchants in the West were more heavily taxed and preyed upon than their Chinese counterparts.¹¹⁸

In mainstream historiography the (presumed) closed-door policy of China's government has long been regarded as a simple 'extension' of that government's xenophobic and closed world-view in which autarky and self-centredness figured prominently. In almost every Western text on the subject, one came, and often still comes, across the famous words of the Qianlong Emperor, in the letter he sent to King George III in the wake of the Macartney Mission. They are supposed to epitomize China's rejection of foreign goods: 'The productions of our Empire are manifold, and in great abundance; nor do we stand in the least need of the produce of other countries.'¹¹⁹ An edict by the same emperor to King George III, moreover, read: 'we have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures.'¹²⁰ One can easily collect many similar quotes.¹²¹ It is not by accident that, for example, Landes and Peyrefitte extensively refer to the failure of this mission. Now various Western historians writing about Qing China deny that China would have been self-centred and closed, even when it comes to people and ideas from the West. Joanna Waley-Cohen, for example, writes: 'From the late sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, then, Chinese were extremely interested in Europe and all it had to offer.'¹²² John Hobson in a way goes even further and now claims that what we see in the

¹¹⁷See his 'Role of the Chinese state', 20.

¹¹⁸See his 'Role of the Chinese state', 18.

¹¹⁹See for this translation Morse, *Chronicles of the East India Company*, II, 248.

¹²⁰See Cranmer-Byng, *Embassy to China*, 340.

¹²¹Let me just give a couple of extra examples. In the preface to a volume on geography in *Notes on All Documents in the Qing Dynasty*, edited during the Qianlong period, it reads: 'China is located at the centre of the earth and surrounded by seas. Overseas countries are considered to be marginal ones.' See for this quotation Zhuang, *Tea, Silver, Opium and War*, 21. By the same Qianlong emperor there also is this quotation: 'The Celestial Court possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks nothing within my territory. The reason that I permit foreigners to come to trade in my country is only because I wish to display my kindness to the people from remote regions' (ibid., 165). For more examples of sinocentrism by Chinese rulers see ibid., 15.

¹²²Waley-Cohen, *Sextants of Beijing*, 128. See also her 'China and western technology', and Zurndorfer, 'Sinologie immobile'.

early modern period is not a 'closed' China refusing to learn from a superior Europe, but on the contrary, a backward Europe that borrowed many things from a China that indeed was 'superior' and did not *need* any 'support' from Western civilization.¹²³

Further revisionism: Early modern parallels in state-building and the creating of empire

Among specialists a much more varied, if not outright confusing, picture of the British and Chinese states in the early modern world has emerged. At least two quite differing pictures of Britain's state can be discerned: one that shows Britain at the time as a state clearly *heading for laissez-faire*, another one emphasizing that what really characterized Britain until the 1840s were its extended fiscal and military apparatus and its mercantilist policies.¹²⁴ When it comes to China, the idea of an Oriental despotic state certainly lingers on in some circles, but here the idea of China as an 'agrarian paternalist' polity has become increasingly popular, not to say dominant, at least among sinologists. Roy Bin Wong, who without any doubt is one of the most influential authors when it comes to describing China's political economy in agrarian paternalist terms, actually does so in a sustained effort to focus on the *differences* in state-formation between Western Europe and China, while subscribing to the 'Californian' view that differences in the level of economic development between advanced regions in Western Europe and advanced regions in China were minimal. In his view, and in that of many other scholars, institutional differences did not make much of a difference for the economies of the two regions *before* industrialization. He and Rosenthal in their *Before and Beyond Divergence* do admit that clear institutional differences existed but they fiercely oppose the suggestion that there might have been anything 'superior' in Western cultural or institutional arrangements and explicitly favour an approach that 'eliminates all possible arguments that make European cultural or political arrangements superior to those found in China'.¹²⁵ In their view 'early modern Chinese political economy was more explicitly intended to foster economic growth than European political economies'.¹²⁶

When it comes to state-formation and nation-building, Evelyn Rawski points to what she sees as clear parallels; according to her in both Western Europe and China during the early modern era there occurred an increase in state revenues, territorial consolidation, administrative centralization and cultural convergence.¹²⁷ In his *China Marches West*, Peter Perdue writes that it is not very enlightening to, as has long been the case, contrast early Qing China as an isolated empire with Europe as an expanding system of states: 'The early Qing Empire, then, was not an isolated, stable, united "Oriental empire", but an

¹²³Hobson, *Eastern Origins*.

¹²⁴Great Britain's state actually had *two* faces, depending on whether one looks at the way it handled domestic affairs or at the handling of matters that pertained to Britain's position in Europe and the wider world.

¹²⁵Rosenthal and Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence*, 101.

¹²⁶Rosenthal and Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence*, 209.

¹²⁷Rawski, 'Qing formation'.

evolving state structure engaged in mobilisation for expansionist warfare.¹²⁸ According to him it would be a mistake to continue to use 'the models that argue for distinctive features of a European state system, marked by pluralism, competition, or special core-periphery structures' and then 'draw an oversimplified contrast between Western Europe and the rest of the Eurasian world.'¹²⁹ For the period up until the 1750s, he sees similar interactions between commercial exchange and military force across the entire Eurasian continent. It is only from then onwards, so he claims, that developments in China and the West did indeed begin to diverge and clear differences did become visible. With the delimitation of a fixed border with Russia and the elimination of the Zunghar Mongol state in the 1760s, according to him, China's rulers felt they had finished their state-building project and it was only then that, while no longer facing threats from the Central Eurasian steppe, that their empire lost dynamism and flexibility.¹³⁰ John Darwin in his book on the global history of empire is also keen to point out that differences between what went on in Europe and in Asia were not that big: 'State-building and cultural innovation were striking features of Eurasian, not just European, history in the early modern era.'¹³¹ Wenkai He in his comparison of institutional development in the field of public finance in England (1642–1753), Japan (1868–95), and China (1850–1911) also tends to lean towards emphasizing resemblances rather than differences. He clearly is aware of existing differences and focuses on different outcomes: the emergence of a modern centralized fiscal state in England and Japan in contrast to its non-emergence in Qing China. But he starts with a pages-long introduction focusing on the comparability of England, Japan and China in terms of their state-formation.¹³² Among the 'revisionists' Goldstone seems to hold a minority view with his claim that the British state became something quite exceptional and that this did matter a lot.¹³³

The functioning of China's bureaucracy too seems to be undergoing re-evaluation. As with so many aspects of the history of late imperial China, it has been described in surprisingly dissenting terms and been the object of surprisingly differing assessments, ranging from often quite positive ones in the early modern era, to negative ones during most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and again much more positive ones during roughly the last twenty years. In the eighteenth century, at the height of Enlightenment 'Sinophilia', China's system of rule by gentry scholars had been widely admired in certain circles and regarded as much more rational, or if you like 'modern', than Western systems of administration. In Europe, overall, by far the majority of 'public' jobs were still firmly in the hands of 'non-professionals': aristocrats who claimed their jobs by birth; people who had bought them and often managed to pass them down to one of their children; or, especially on a regional and local level, people who did some public work without any or with hardly any remuneration and qualification, just as a kind of 'civic

¹²⁸Perdue, *China Marches West*, chs 15 and 16n. The quotation is on page 527.

¹²⁹Perdue, *China Marches West*, 527.

¹³⁰Perdue, *China Marches West*, 550–1.

¹³¹Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, 104.

¹³²He, *Paths toward the Modern Fiscal State*, ch. 1.

¹³³Goldstone, *Why Europe*, ch. 6.

duty' or 'civic honour'. It can hardly come as a surprise that, as compared to the highly *un*-professional system that characterized most of *Ancien Régime* Western Europe, many Europeans regarded China's system as superior. There, at least, people were employed who had to qualify for their jobs and who actually worked for the government instead of for themselves. Many Europeans thought China's civil administration examination system was an example to be imitated.¹³⁴

This positive image did disappear with the disintegration and erosion of Qing rule that became increasingly obvious with the passing of the nineteenth century. Among scholars it was probably Max Weber's analysis in particular that put China's officials in a less positive light through his claim that, some appearances notwithstanding, according to his ideal-type, they were *not* 'real' bureaucrats and China's system of administration *not* a 'real' bureaucracy. Weber clearly was aware that China's administration with its examination system presented a break with feudalism and characterized it as a 'patrimonial bureaucracy' in which social rank, at his time for already twelve centuries, was determined 'more by qualification for office than by wealth'. He even goes as far as to claim that, in strictly formal terms, China had been 'the most perfect example of a typically modern pacified and bureaucratic society'.¹³⁵ He, however, was quite adamant that, as he calls it – probably not very helpfully – 'the spirit' of bureaucratic work differed widely in 'the East' and in 'the West'. The Confucian gentlemen who ruled China were not and did not want to be specialists. They did not receive specialist education and were not trained to become professionals in a rational, utilitarian organization. They, still according to Weber, did not function in a system with a clear division of labour and a clear delineation of competences. The bulk of their income was irregular; that is it did not consist in official remunerations. What in his view is even more important is that they clearly were not operating in a rational legal system.¹³⁶ Weber's views became extremely influential. Many comparisons have been made between China and Europe that use his ideas as point of departure or even as a measuring rod and they all tended to conclude that China indeed was different and 'less' bureaucratic than Western countries.¹³⁷ Weber, so to say, studied the *theory* of Chinese administration and found it defective. Authors who were more interested in its *practice* also became less impressed. They began to refer to a lack of efficiency and widespread corruption. The alternative image of imperial China as an inefficient and corrupt polity clearly gained in popularity with the passing of time.

Here too the tide has, again, turned. A recent example is the book by Alexander Woodside on the bureaucratic politics of pre-industrial China, Vietnam and Korea with

¹³⁴See for the way in which those exams were regarded in Western public opinion Jacobsen, 'Chinese influences or images', 632–4. For actual Chinese influence on the reform of Britain's civil service see Chang, 'China and English Civil Service reform', and Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, 161. A report presented in 1853 finally led to the adoption of examinations for entry into the civil service of the United Kingdom. They were based on knowledge of the Roman and Greek classics and mathematics.

¹³⁵These quotations are respectively from the opening sentence of chapter 5 in his *Religion of China* and from page 610 of his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. The translation of the second quotation into English is mine.

¹³⁶For Weber's point of view I refer to his *Religion of China*, in particular Part Two, and to his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* under 'China'. For an analysis, see Van der Sprenkel, 'Max Weber on China'.

¹³⁷See Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, ch. 1, and Yang, 'Some characteristics'.

the revealing title *Lost Modernities*. In this book the author, as he claims, sets out to recover one of (what he claims are) the multiple sources of modernity and finds it in the way in which these countries were, already in the early modern era, looking for – and to an unprecedented way even actually creating – a merit-based bureaucracy. He claims that China, and Japan and Korea, were ‘postfeudal’ long before Western Europe and had rationalized their system of government by training their government officials long before any effort was made to create a merit-based administrative structure in the West. This makes him conclude that ‘rationalization’, a phenomenon that, ever since Weber, plays such a central role in studies dealing with global history, is a manifold process that can take different shapes in different contexts. Processes of rationalization, moreover, may occur independently of each other. According to him, the existence of what he calls ‘East Asian mandarinates’ shows that the differences between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ have been exaggerated and ought to put an end to one civilization’s (i.e., of course, the West’s) historical self-centredness. This obligatory and ritualistic attack on the self-centredness of the West, which always leaves me somewhat bewildered when it is performed by people who study ‘the Middle Kingdom’ or ‘all under heaven’, does not mean that Woodside would ignore the hazards and weaknesses of the ‘mandarinate’ system. Quite the contrary, he gives us a very informative and insightful analysis of, in particular, its feeble capacity to mobilize the population for collective purposes. But overall his tone is one of showing East Asia’s precocious political modernity and of proudly pointing at its education-based governments of talents.¹³⁸ Peter Perdue apparently agrees and claims Woodside’s book ‘punctures Western pretensions by showing that East Asian societies anticipated contemporary controversies over bureaucracy, meritocracy and social welfare’.¹³⁹ Roy Bin Wong, too, has no qualms about describing Qing China’s administration as a bureaucracy and in his *China Transformed* explicitly writes about the ‘bureaucratic’ way in which the empire was ruled.¹⁴⁰ On top of that, according to him, China’s bureaucracy was not just like any other bureaucracy at the time. He claims that it ‘certainly [was] the world’s largest eighteenth-century civilian state operation’.¹⁴¹ In that respect he and Wensheng Wang, who is much less positive about its actual functioning, seem to agree. Wang describes Qing China under the Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors as a ‘highly interventionist state’ with a ‘vast bureaucracy’.¹⁴² As such, that of course need not imply it was efficient and powerful. Wong, however, clearly thinks it was: ‘The Chinese state developed an infrastructural capacity to mobilize and disburse revenues quite beyond the imagination, let alone the abilities, of European state makers at the moment.’¹⁴³ In his view it would be a major mistake to regard Qing

¹³⁸Woodside, *Lost Modernities*, ‘Introduction’ and ‘Conclusion’.

¹³⁹See for this comment the back flap of Woodside’s book.

¹⁴⁰See e.g. Wong, *China Transformed*, 134, 157 and 282.

¹⁴¹Wong, ‘Changing fiscal regime’, 14. For a comparison with several European states that does not corroborate Wong’s claim see chapter 4.

¹⁴²Wang, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates*, 257. See also *ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴³Wong, *China Transformed*, 132. See also Epstein, who writes about the ‘apparently high degree of fiscal efficiency in pre-modern China’. Epstein, ‘Rise of the West’, 248.

China as something of a ‘failed bureaucratic state’ (or for that matter as an example of oriental despotism). He, time and again, claims that the Qing state showed ‘commitments to material welfare beyond anything imaginable, let alone achieved, in Europe’¹⁴⁴ and that ‘The ambit of Chinese imperial authority and power stretched far beyond those of European states in spatial scale and substantive variety.’¹⁴⁵ He is impressed in particular by imperial China’s state-sponsored granaries for famine relief and claims: ‘To think of state concerns for popular welfare as a very recent political practice makes sense only if we again limit ourselves to Western examples.’¹⁴⁶ In his co-edited volume with Will (1991), he had already written: ‘European states failed to promote granaries and other food supply policies found in China to ease subsistence anxieties.’¹⁴⁷ On top of that, he suggests that in Europe states lacked a ‘deep concern with elite and popular education and morality ... and ... [an] invasive curiosity about and anxiety over potentially subversive behaviour.’¹⁴⁸

Almost all quotations in the previous paragraph were from Wong’s *China Transformed*, but Wong clearly has not changed his opinions since and continues to claim that social government expenditures in Qing China were substantially higher than was usual in Europe until the late nineteenth century and that this was caused by its many ‘paternalistic’ practices.¹⁴⁹ In his recent *Before and Beyond Divergence*, he and Rosenthal still claim ‘the rulers of the Middle Kingdom seem to have spent considerably more resources on public goods than any European ruler.’¹⁵⁰

What makes these views interesting and relevant is that they have become widely accepted as unquestioned truths. It will not come as a surprise that Pierre-Étienne Will agrees with his one-time co-author. Before publishing *China Transformed*, Wong, together with Will and a couple of other authors, had already written a book on civilian granaries and food redistribution in Qing China. In that book, they both were quite optimistic about the capacities and efficiency of China’s administrative system when it came to food distribution for the largest part of the eighteenth century.¹⁵¹ One can also encounter this positive view in two articles Will wrote for the famous French journal *Annales* in 1994.¹⁵² In the first one, on modern China and sinology, we find a critique of Max Weber for having denied other civilizations the aptitude to create institutions capable of rendering services similar to those provided for by bureaucracies in the West and with the potential to evolve in a similar direction. Will points at various parallels, convergences and structural similarities in the construction of modern states

¹⁴⁴Wong, *China Transformed*, 98–9.

¹⁴⁵Wong, *China Transformed*, 103.

¹⁴⁶Wong, *China Transformed*, 98–9.

¹⁴⁷Wong on page 521 in a contribution of his to Will and Wong, *Nourish the People*.

¹⁴⁸Wong, *China Transformed*, 103 and 101.

¹⁴⁹See e.g. Wong, ‘Relationships between the political economies’, 30–1, and idem, ‘Politiques de dépenses’, 1408.

¹⁵⁰Rosenthal and Wong, *Before and beyond Divergence*, 173.

¹⁵¹I refer to Will and Wong, *Nourish the People*. Before that, Will had already written, in the same vein, *Bureaucratie et famine*.

¹⁵²Will, ‘Chine moderne et sinologie’ and ‘Développement quantitatif’.

in China and in Europe at the level of institutions and regulations and thinks it was not by accident that up until the nineteenth century and, in some cases even longer, China's state had been praised as rational. China's early modern state reminds him of the '*état technocratique*' of France after the French Revolution. He does not recoil from calling China's state and economy 'modern' from the beginning of the sixteenth century onwards. Here too we find the claim that when it comes to economic security and social protection early modern China had developed institutions that have to be regarded as precursors of arrangements that states in Europe were only to develop much later.¹⁵³ The comments made so far were from Will's first article in *Annales*. In his second publication he appears to be somewhat less 'optimist' about the actual grip of central government on China's society at large and suggests that the actual administering of that society in most respects was done primarily at the local level. But even so the impression he gives of the situation in the eighteenth century is one of an administration that clearly is not so much defective as simply setting itself different goals and working under differing constraints – external as well as self-imposed – than governments in the West. What he wants to bring across is an image of a basically conservative government that does its best to improve society without basically changing it, not an image of plain inefficiency and corruption.¹⁵⁴

Woodside in his recent study of East Asian 'mandarinates' explicitly and in full agreement refers to the statements by Wong that I quoted earlier.¹⁵⁵ Hoffman, Postel-Vinay and Rosenthal, writing about the early modern period, claim, as if it is a matter of proven fact and referring to Will and Wong: 'China spent ... more [than Europe] on what we might call public welfare. ... [It] devoted far more of its resources to famine relief ... than did European states.' Their additional comment that Imperial China had developed a tax bureaucracy that transferred tax revenues 'on a scale unheard of in Europe' can hardly come as a surprise.¹⁵⁶ Martin Jacques in his recent book on the rise of the Middle Kingdom fully endorses every claim Wong has made about the efficient, bureaucratic welfare state of the Qing.¹⁵⁷ Kent Deng, who rejects many claims of the Californians, does not hesitate to refer very positively to the 'proto-welfare systems' of the Qing state in its heydays.¹⁵⁸ Robert Marks in this context writes about 'an impressive state relief system' and claims that: 'Given [its] impressive relief credentials, it probably never occurred to the Qing state that the preservation of forests could function as a life preserver for the rural population in times of crisis.'¹⁵⁹ Mathias Heinrich, in an article on welfare and public philanthropy in Qing China, writes: 'the Qing government

¹⁵³ All these rather upbeat characterizations do not imply that Will would be indifferent to differences. He emphasizes that Qing China did not develop into a fiscal-military state and that taxation was and continued to be strikingly low and strikingly stable. The implications of that fact, however, are not addressed.

¹⁵⁴ Will, 'Développement quantitatif'. I refer the reader interested in the practice of China's bureaucracy also to Will, 'Bureaucratie officielle et bureaucratie réelle'.

¹⁵⁵ Woodside, *Lost Modernities*, 56. See also Woodside, 'Ch'ien-lung reign', 307.

¹⁵⁶ Hoffman, Postel-Vinay and Rosenthal, *Surviving Large Losses*, 16.

¹⁵⁷ Jacques, *When China Rules the World*, 81–6.

¹⁵⁸ Deng, *China's Political Economy*, 19–24.

¹⁵⁹ Marks, *China. Its Environment and History*, 254.

created a complex system of social welfare which dwarfs those of Western pre-modern states.¹⁶⁰ In 2001 Peter Perdue had written: 'In some ways imperial policies then look precociously modern. Qing China's welfare policies, for example (orphanages and famine relief) and price regulation with ever-normal granaries, exceeded those of most European states until the mid-twentieth century.'¹⁶¹ Let me give one last quotation, by Jeremy Black, who makes this comment on early modern states: 'Central government meant, in most countries, the monarch and a small group of advisers and officials. The notion that they were capable of creating the basis of a modern state is misleading, although an exception may be suggested for China where the resources and scale of government were greater.'¹⁶²

The system of rule of Qing China is now often described in more positive terms. Madeleine Zelin, for example, in the *Cambridge History of China* writes: 'The policies undertaken during the Yung-cheng reign [1723–35] laid the foundations for the development of a strong, modern state apparatus in the eighteenth century.'¹⁶³ Patricia Thornton agrees that those policies were important and innovative, but thinks their impact was not lasting.¹⁶⁴ William Rowe in his book on Chen Hongmou describes Qing China as 'a Confucian, imperial, centralized bureaucracy'.¹⁶⁵ Scholars, however, who quite some time ago were positive about the organization of the Qing state and its performance, normally tended to become far more pessimistic when discussing the period from the end of the reign of the Qianlong emperor. Many, if not most, scholars used to share the opinion that in the beginning of the nineteenth century China's administration was in disarray.¹⁶⁶ Voices have been raised that even this view would be too bleak.¹⁶⁷

Even the infamous 'country clerks' and 'runners' of the Qing administration are to a certain extent rehabilitated. In as far as our sources, which normally have been written by members of the gentry and officials who tended to look down upon them, can be trusted, they were widely despised and hated during the Qing reign and as a rule regarded as corrupt, inefficient and rapacious. 'All the recent suffering under Heaven is caused by clerks,' a nineteenth-century commentator wrote.¹⁶⁸ It became a standard trope in Qing bureaucratic discourse to describe them and the runners as 'millions of tigers and wolves'. The problem of disciplining this 'sub-bureaucracy' became perhaps the single central theme of all Qing administrative writing.¹⁶⁹ In historiography they fared

¹⁶⁰Heinrich, 'Welfare and public philanthropy', 126.

¹⁶¹Perdue, 'Empire and nation', 301.

¹⁶²Black, *Power of Knowledge*, 122. See also *ibid.*, 166.

¹⁶³Zelin, 'Yung-cheng reign', 228.

¹⁶⁴Thornton, *Disciplining the State*, 69.

¹⁶⁵Rowe, *Saving the World*, 326.

¹⁶⁶For the standard 'declinist' view on the history of China from the end of the rule of the Qianlong emperor onwards, see Mann Jones and Kuhn, 'Dynastic decline'.

¹⁶⁷See for an overview Wang, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates*, and the literature referred to there on pages 1–34.

¹⁶⁸Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, 1.

¹⁶⁹I paraphrase Rowe, *Saving the World*, 339.

hardly any better for a long time: 'the evil clerk or runner [figured] as the stock villain on the stage of local government.'¹⁷⁰ Now, dissenting voices make themselves heard, in particular in Bradley Reed's book.¹⁷¹ This author of course cannot deny that most of what they did in the literal sense of the word probably was 'illegal' and that various forms of what we would now call 'corruption' were rife. But he points at the fact that those runners and clerks simply had to find ways of earning their income. As a rule they did not receive an official salary and, as they did not have an official job with all the rules and regulation that we associate with that, they simply had to improvise and behave 'extra-legal' or 'a-legal'. Moreover, whatever their exact position and behaviour, they simply were indispensable. Reed describes them as 'illicit bureaucrats' and writes about their activities in terms of 'the legitimacy of the indispensable'.¹⁷²

A final example of the 'upgrading' of China's state, in this case to a large extent by 'downplaying' what had happened in Europe, can be found in the book by Victoria Tin-bor Hui on war and state-formation in ancient China and early modern Europe. Although she only refers to the situation in ancient China (i.e. China from 656–221 BC), this book too can be seen as part and parcel of a 'rehabilitation' of China's process of state-formation in that period and later on. She presents – to me quite surprising – the claim that state-formation in early modern Europe would have been characterized by what she calls 'self-weakening' expedients. The most important of those expedients are the use of military entrepreneurs and mercenaries, of tax farming and the sale of public offices. Her rehabilitation, so to say, primarily is *a contrario*. She claims that what was happening in early modern Europe was not exactly impressive and clearly fell short of what had been happening in China for many centuries. She characterizes developments in early modern Europe as state *deformation*. She suggests that in early modern Europe central authority would have been increasingly eroded by intermediate power-holders and thus monopolization of the means of coercion proved to be impossible, the rationalization and nationalization of taxation got derailed and bureaucratization of administration was negated. This definitely is a highly original interpretation of the history of the state in Europe between the later Middle Ages and Waterloo.¹⁷³

Some authors would even want to include imperialism in their list of 'striking [Eurasian] resemblances'. This would imply that Qing China was quite successful when it comes to the wielding of power against other countries. Here too one comes across examples of radical revisionism. Jeremy Black, expert in the field of military history,

¹⁷⁰Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, 252.

¹⁷¹Reed, *Talons and Teeth*.

¹⁷²Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, ch. 7.

¹⁷³Hui, *War and State Formation*, 49, table 5. The author declares she has written her book to challenge the presumption that Europe was *destined* to enjoy checks and balances while China was *preordained* to suffer under a coercive universal empire. See page III. (The italics are mine.) I have never read a text containing those presumptions. Perdue describes her book as a 'superb demonstration of how comparative analysis of Europe and China can point the way to more adequate theories and better-informed history'. See his review.

in a book about warfare in the eighteenth century, makes the following claim: ‘The most dynamic state and the most successful military power in the world, on land, was China.’¹⁷⁴ Evelyn Rawski does not recoil from explicitly claiming that Qing China, again just like Western nations, was imperialist: ‘In the early modern historiography, the omission of the expanding empires, such as the Habsburgs in Eastern Europe, the Russian Empire, or the Qing Empire, reflects a persistent western Eurocentric bias.’¹⁷⁵ She even complains that an ‘odd historiographical bias that assigns “imperialism” and “colonialism” to Europe and “empire building” to the Chinese, Zulus and others’ privileges Europe. That would be because ‘colonialism is deemed to be one of the global forces that have defined the modern age [whereas] empires are seen as modes of state expansion that are increasingly anachronistic in an era of industrialization and high technology.’¹⁷⁶ Paraphrasing Adas, she writes, that ‘Manchu (Qing) imperialism shared many parallels with the British, French and Dutch colonialism in South and Southeast Asia.’¹⁷⁷ Darwin seems to agree: ‘It would be a mistake to draw too sharp a distinction between “European” methods and “Asian”’,¹⁷⁸ When comparing the Qing Empire to the Mughal, Muscovy-Romanov, Ottoman and British empires, Rowe claims: ‘We are now struck less by the differences than by the common features of their imperial ambitions.’¹⁷⁹ Laura Hostetler writes that she wants ‘to highlight the similarities between the methods, technologies and ideologies that the Qing Empire employed in extending its geographical reach, and those used by European colonial powers during the same period’.¹⁸⁰ Arrighi in his *Adam Smith in Beijing*, while pointing out several important differences between the European and the East Asian interstate system nevertheless calls them both ‘state-systems’ and considers them similar enough to make a comparison of them analytically meaningful.¹⁸¹ Qing imperialism and the relations between Manchus, Han and other inhabitants of the Qing Empire have become very popular subjects.¹⁸² Even though authors like Adas and Arrighi in their work emphasize that some quite substantial differences existed between Qing China’s imperialism and that of the nations of Western Europe, the tendency to focus on similarities at the moment is predominant.

¹⁷⁴Black, *Warfare in the Eighteenth Century*, 31.

¹⁷⁵Rawski, ‘Qing formation’, 209.

¹⁷⁶Rawski, ‘Qing formation’, 220.

¹⁷⁷Rawski, ‘Qing formation’, 221. She refers to Adas, ‘Imperialism and colonialism’.

¹⁷⁸Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, 493.

¹⁷⁹Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, 73. On page 7 of that book he calls those empires ‘effectively similar’.

¹⁸⁰Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise*, 30. She refers to the eighteenth century.

¹⁸¹Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, 314–5.

¹⁸²For further examples see, in alphabetical order: Christian, *History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*; Dabringhaus, *Qing-Imperium*; Dai, *Sichuan Frontier and Tibet*; Giersch, *Asian Borderlands*; Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist*; Isett, *State, Peasant, and Merchant*; Lee, *Political Economy of a Frontier*; Millward, *Beyond the Pass and Eurasian Crossroads*; Perdue, ‘Erasing the empire’; idem, ‘Nature and nurture’; idem, *China Marches West*; Richards, *Unending Frontier*; Rhoads, *Manchus and Han*; Shepherd, *Statecraft and Political Economy*; Siu and Sutton, *Empire at the Margins*, and Teng, *Taiwan’s Imagined Geography*. For review articles see Guy, ‘Who were the Manchus?’ and Supdita, ‘New frontiers’.