

state formation in East Asia. I highly recommend it for scholars and students interested in the history and politics of the region and will assign it in any classes that I teach on state-building and historical political economy.

Response to Yuhua Wang's Review of *State Formation through Emulation: The East Asian Model*

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— Chin-Hao Huang 
— David C. Kang

Yuhua Wang raises an important critique of *State Formation through Emulation*, noting that we move too quickly in our argument against the bellicist mechanism for state formation. Wang's critique points to the deep fissures in the state formation literature and the contested nature of state behavior in international politics more broadly. As such, this exchange has been an important opportunity to truly compare two very different theoretical approaches to social science.

Wang argues that the Qin state engaged in bureaucratic reforms so that it could conquer smaller neighbors and that war was a key determinant in Korea's state formation. Wang also finds that the violent clashes between steppe nomads and China, as well as Japan's accrual of material power after the Meiji Restoration, raise questions about the effectiveness of the tributary system and the extent to which emulation truly reflected state-building practices in the region. To Wang and for most of the theoretical scholarship in international relations, the perpetual state of conflict in a zero-sum, anarchic environment seems to confirm rather than delimit the universalistic logic of bellicism in state formation.

What was perhaps most surprising about Wang's review is that he did not address our core argument: that the extraordinarily long-enduring states in the region emulated a truly massive amount of their religious, social, intellectual, philosophical, scientific, economic, and, yes, political ideas and practices from the hegemonic power—China—over the centuries. The evidence for this is simply overwhelming.

We were also a bit disappointed that Wang did not engage further with the specifics of our book. We dealt in detail with questions of war and order in chapter 4 and explicitly addressed the Tang–Silla alliance in the seventh century (pp. 60–67). Our larger point remains unchallenged: all three Korean kingdoms sought an alliance with the more powerful Tang dynasty, rather than allying together to balance against it. Historian Nadia Kanagawa, whom we quoted (pp. 61–62), points out that “both Paekche and Silla sent envoys to the Tang complaining that Koguryō was preventing them from sending tribute and asking the Tang ruler to take action.” Patterns of alliance and war worked nothing like what one would

expect from the universalist models of contemporary IR such as the balance of power. Furthermore, once Korea was unified, the Tang dynasty relinquished its ambitions to the peninsula. None of this is explainable without understanding the relative position of China in the region and the principles of the tribute system as practiced at the time.

More generally, we have dealt elsewhere with issues of historical and contemporary regional variation in both war and the types of international order and need not repeat those arguments (e.g., see David Kang, *East Asia before the West*, 2010; Chin-Hao Huang, *Power and Restraint in China's Rise*, 2022).

The *longue durée* of peace and stability remains a puzzle for those trying to fit Europe's experience onto the historical realities of East Asian state development. We conclude that deeply institutionalized states in historical East Asia strengthened under the shadow of a hegemonic international system through astonishing levels of emulation and where conflict was relatively rare. We believe both Wang's and our book open up a range of important avenues for future research and look forward to continuing the stimulating dialogues that such questions provoke.

The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development. By Yuhua Wang. Princeton: Princeton

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— Chin-Hao Huang , Yale-NUS College
chinhao.huang@yale-nus.edu.sg
— David C. Kang , University of Southern California
kangdc@usc.edu

Yuhua Wang's *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development* identifies a thought-provoking question: How did imperial China endure for so long even as its state capacity seemingly weakened over time? In this magisterial book, Wang relies on innovative historical data—from reading and coding a copious number of epitaphs and genealogical records to compiling new and original datasets on Chinese emperors, taxation, and military conflicts—to advance new claims about the ruler–elite relationship in imperial China. The empirical work is a tour de force, ensuring this is a big book with provocative ideas. It promises to become a crucial work on historical political economy and state formation that everyone should read.

For Wang, rulers are revenue maximizers, but they also seek to extend their grip on power. These two objectives are incompatible, leading to Wang's observation of a “sovereign's dilemma” in which strengthening state capacity through tax collection jeopardizes the ruler's odds of survival. The equilibrium is struck by looking at the role of

the elites and their social networks, or the “elite social terrain.” Wang argues that elites hold the key to keeping a check on the ruler’s authority, which concomitantly helps protect their power and privilege.

Rather than relying on constraining mechanisms that were commonplace in Europe—for example, instituting parliamentary sovereignty or constitutional monarchies—the elites in imperial China achieved similar goals by forming different types of social networks. In Wang’s rationalist model, three ideal types of such networks are neatly mapped onto the chronology of China’s state development: the “star” network of elites leads to state strength but lower ruler survival (e.g., the Tang dynasty); the “bowtie” network leads to greater ruler survival but weaker, albeit medium-level, state strength (e.g., the period after the Tang dynasty, starting with the Song dynasty and running through the Ming era); and the “ring” network that yields low state strength and eventual state involution yet high ruler survival (e.g., the late Qing dynasty). In short, the elites enhance or inhibit ruler survival and thus influence the strength of the state.

Wang’s rationalist and materialist approach to state formation contrasts nicely with our own approach, which emphasizes culture and ideas. As such, this review is an opportunity to highlight how these approaches differ and what their relative strengths might be. We argue that although Wang’s analysis may be able to explain some variation in state capacity, it misses the forest for the trees with regard to the crux of the debate on state-building: beliefs about the proper role of the state. One cannot explain the principles or practices of the Chinese state without focusing on the cultural and philosophical ideas that gave rise to and sustained the state over two millennia. Simply looking at the material interests of the elites is insufficient. Indeed, even for European state formation, there are a growing number of revisionist accounts that emphasize the religious or cultural significance of state formation (e.g., see Anna Grzymala-Busse, *Sacred Foundations: The Religious and Medieval Roots of the European State*, 2023; Philip Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe*, 2003).

Nevertheless, Wang begins with the main elements in place, such as the institutions and form of the Chinese state, the interests and identities of key actors, and, in particular, their assumptions about what the state should be and should do. By starting with the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD), Wang does not account for the origins of the key features of the state that endured over time, many of which appeared centuries before the Tang. Nor, in fact, does Wang explain the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911. The “elite social terrain” does not account for the principles or purpose of the state nor its beginning or ultimate end. Instead, Wang focuses on uncovering the microprocesses through which elites influenced tax collection and the

correlation with ruler survival. Both are historically fascinating but cannot ultimately address the stated focus of the book, which is on the *longue durée* reasons for the rise and fall of imperial China.

There is a stark difference between the cultural and rationalist approach to explaining state development. In our book, we use the former approach not because of any ideological commitment but because it better explains the causes and consequences of Chinese state formation. Wang views the elites as “agents of their connected social groups; their objective is to influence government policies to provide the best services to their groups at the lowest possible cost” (p. 7). In looking solely at the economic interests of the elites and downplaying other measures of state strength, such as the provision of public goods or external defense, in favor of extraction, Wang’s analysis misses important and enduring features of the Chinese state: these include the emperor’s mandate; a civil service staffed by scholar-officials selected through a nationwide examination system, the establishment of six ministries that formed the basis of state administration for more than one thousand years, a massive standing army, low taxes and no central bank to fund the state, a national legal system, and public granaries. What sustained the Chinese state over two millennia was its philosophical and cultural purpose, as expressed through Confucian texts and principles, as well as Daoist, Legalist, and Buddhist ideas.

For instance, the need to constrain the ruler’s power was not an issue of central concern in imperial China; hence, the longevity of each political dynasty and the relative stability between 1000 AD to the mid-1800s. Oddly, Wang sees this as the same period in which state capacity declined. He comes to this conclusion because, on his view, state strength is measured through tax collection, yet we argue that state strength goes beyond extractive fiscal policies. A strong state is better characterized by secure borders; the stability of society enabling agricultural production, arts, literature, education, and culture to flourish, and government provisions and public goods that are robust enough to avoid having to engage in excessive taxation. These elements are the result of prudent and responsible governance rather than a weakened central authority.

In focusing on the microfoundational argument about why rational elites would behave in a certain way vis-à-vis the ruler, Wang underestimates the political culture that affects the broader role of authority in society. In historical East Asia, the responsibility of rule is the starting point of analysis for political governance, rather than a blanket assumption of the abuse of power that often characterized the contentious sovereign–aristocracy relationship in Europe.

The empirical evidence Wang provides is not necessarily as helpful in substantiating his argument as one would wish. First, Wang’s theoretical model rests squarely on the

social organization of elites, yet there is a noticeable complication in the model. As the elite social terrain changes from one form to another, presumably the state's function and purpose should change fundamentally as well. Yet the Chinese state retained many of its core features, regardless of change over time in the social organization of elites. As Yuri Pines (*The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy*, 2012, p. 2) observes, "For 2,132 years, we may discern striking similarities in institutional, socio-political, and cultural spheres throughout the imperial millennia. The Chinese empire was an extraordinarily powerful ideological construct." At its core, Wang's theoretical model does not explain why the state would retain such continuity in its form and function despite changes in the elites' organizational network.

Second, the analysis of the Qing dynasty forms a key part of Wang's argument, and here we respectfully disagree with his assessment of its weak state capacity. We were a bit surprised to see very little mention of scholarship from the "New Qing History," in which new historical evidence has challenged many of the older, more negative, views of the Qing. We find it difficult to accept that the "ring" network could account for all the turmoil the Qing faced, including the Opium Wars, unequal treaties, the sack of Beijing, and the Taiping rebellion. Even as chaos persisted in the 1850s, the Qing remained resilient, suppressing the Taiping forces, as well as the Nian, Muslims in the southwest, the Dungan Muslims in the northwest, and the Yakub Beg in Central Asia. Stephen Halsey (*Quest for Power: European Imperialism and the Making of Chinese Statecraft*, 2015, pp. 4–5) notes, "After the mid-1800s, the government expanded its revenue base through new commercial taxes.... New fiscal bureaucracies enabled the state to extract additional resources." When transit surcharges on goods were imposed to cover military costs at the height of internal rebellions, the Qing ensured they would be temporarily in control. Similarly, both Kent Deng ("Ultra-Low Tax Regime in Imperial China, 1368–1911," LSE Economic History Working Papers, no. 324, 2021) and Taisu Zhang (*The Ideological Foundations of Qing Taxation: Belief Systems, Politics, and Institutions*, 2023) recently argued the Qing had an ideological preference for low taxes. The Qing ultimately fell—but not as a direct consequence of the "ring" network of elites.

Finally, we find the generalizability of Wang's argument to be strained. For instance, Wang argues that the "star" network of elites was present in both medieval China and England after the Norman Conquest. If the elite social terrain is the same in both countries, then presumably state capacity should be similar as well. But by almost every metric of state development, Norman England and Imperial China looked nothing alike. For example, England's first standing army only came about in 1660 and comprised a mere 5,000 troops. In contrast, Wang notes that

by the sixteenth century, the Ming had a standing army of over four million men (p. 138).

In short, Chinese elites were clearly purposeful and intentional, given their interests, identities, and beliefs about the proper role of the state. We submit, however, that one cannot come to anything like the enduring features of the Chinese state simply by considering the economic interests of the elites. Without knowing what they cared about and their ideas about the functions and purpose of the state, one can hardly arrive at anything approximating the Chinese state over two thousand years.

These thoughts aside, this will be an important and much-discussed book, and we look forward to continuing our dialogue. Wang succeeds in his larger aim—to provide a provocative and powerful argument about Chinese state development. This book is a major contribution to a growing literature on state formation around the world that is building on, modifying, and challenging the arguments that came out of the European experience. We are sympathetic to the overall agenda of this project, even if we ultimately disagree with some of his conclusions.

Response to Chin-Hao Huang and David C. Kang's Review of *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development*

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— Yuhua Wang 

Huang and Kang's approach and my own represent two fundamentally distinct perspectives in the study of politics. Whereas Huang and Kang argue that culture serves as the main driving force behind political processes, I maintain that humans are rational beings whose behaviors are shaped by careful calculations of costs and benefits.

As a discipline, we should embrace these differences. The field of state-building benefits from scholars using diverse approaches to examine state development in various regions, rather than adhering solely to the bellicist paradigm that once dominated the field. The cultural and rational choice approaches are not mutually exclusive. For instance, people may make different cost-benefit calculations based on their cultural backgrounds. In my book, I argue that the primary objective of Chinese elites is to maximize their families' protection at the lowest possible cost. Huang and Kang might attribute this to Chinese culture's emphasis on familism. However, I view this as a result of China's social structure, which was dominated by extended families. In other words, if extended families were prevalent in Europe (e.g., if they were not dissolved by the church), Europeans would likely prioritize families in a similar manner, regardless of their European "culture."

Although culture deserves its place in the social sciences, I argue that it falls short in explaining China's state development for three reasons. First, culture cannot