

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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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

account for changes. Huang and Kang's cultural explanation is highly static, suggesting that once Confucianism emerged, it would dictate the development of the Chinese state (and to some extent, the Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese states) for the next two thousand years. This perspective reflects one of the most significant misunderstandings of the Chinese state, often found in traditional Eurocentric portrayals of Asian societies (see a critique of this perspective in Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1979). In my book, I demonstrate that China's state development underwent significant changes. Emperors' survival rates fluctuated, as did the strength of the Chinese state. The enduring Chinese culture fails to explain these variations.

Second, culture has limited explanatory power when it comes to elite behavior. My book reveals that among nearly 300 Chinese emperors, more than one-quarter were deposed by elites, a percentage similar to the likelihood of modern autocrats being deposed by elite coups (see Milan Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 2012). If Confucianism—a culture emphasizing obedience and political hierarchy—shaped elite behavior, how can we account for the unfortunate fate of Chinese rulers who were assassinated, poisoned, or forced to commit suicide as frequently as African presidents? Even Huang and Kang resort to rational choice when explaining individual behavior, arguing that Korean rulers strategically adopted the Chinese civil service examination system to weaken the

nobility's power and bolster the monarch's control of the bureaucracy.

Finally, cultural explanations often suffer from conceptual ambiguity and risk trapping scholars in tautological reasoning. When culture is not precisely defined, it becomes a vague concept that scholars can use in various ways to suit their arguments. (In Huang and Kang's book, there is no definition of culture, their core independent variable.) This leads to the dangerous possibility of tautology: East Asia differs from Europe because East Asians are distinct from Europeans; Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese people adopt Chinese practices because they share cultural similarities with the Chinese, whereas Central Asian nomads do not because of their cultural differences. I firmly believe that humans are fundamentally the same, seeking the best opportunities within the constraints they face. The variation in political processes results from the distinct opportunities and constraints presented by the political, economic, and social contexts in which humans are situated.

Although Huang, Kang, and I may hold differing viewpoints regarding the driving forces behind state development, we are united in our aim to move from the traditional Eurocentric paradigm and embrace a fresh perspective inspired by East Asian experiences. It is my hope that our critical dialogue herein will serve as a catalyst for a thriving research trajectory in the years to come.