1

From the "Great Convergence" to the "First Great Divergence"

Roman and Qin-Han State Formation and Its Aftermath

Walter Scheidel

1. Twin Empires?

Two thousand years ago, perhaps half of the entire human species had come under the control of just two powers, the Roman and Han empires, at opposite ends of Eurasia. Both entities were broadly similar in terms of size.[1] Both of them were run by god-like emperors residing in the largest cities the world had seen so far, were made up of some 1,500 to 2,000 administrative districts, and, at least at times, employed hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Both states laid claim to ruling the whole world, *orbis terrarum* and *tianxia*, while both encountered similar competition for surplus between central government and local elites and similar pressures generated by secondary state formation beyond their frontiers and subsequent "barbarian" infiltration. Both of them even ended in similar ways: one half, the original political core—the west in Europe, the north in China—was first weakened by warlordism and then taken over by "barbarian" successor states, whereas the other half was preserved by a traditionalist regime. It was only from the late sixth century C.E. onward that the two trajectories of state formation began to diverge, slowly at first but more dramatically over time, between the cyclical restoration of a China-wide empire in the East and the decline of empire and central government in the West, followed by the slow creation of a polycentric state system that proved resistant to any attempts to impose hegemony, let alone unification, and ultimately evolved into the now-familiar cluster of modern nation states. In terms

1. Both empires controlled approximately 4 million square kilometers of territory. The Han census of 2 C.E. recorded 59.6 million individuals. Lower census tallies of between 47.6 and 56.5 million during the second century C.E. are probably marred by higher levels of underregistration (Bielenstein 1987: 12). The Roman imperial population may have grown to around 65 to 75 million by the mid-second century C.E. (Scheidel 2007: 48), but this is just a rough estimate, and an even larger total cannot be ruled out. Recent guesses concerning the total number of humans in the first two centuries C.E. range from 170 to 330 million (Cohen 1995: 400).

of state size, state capacity, and state institutions, we observe a prolonged process of gradual convergence that lasted for many centuries but was eventually replaced by a process of increasing divergence that continued into the early twentieth century. I argue that this allows us to speak of a "Great Convergence" that spanned the entire first millennium B.C.E. and the first half of the first millennium C.E., until a "(First) Great Divergence" began to unfold from about the sixth century C.E. onward.[2]

2. Environment

As far as the ecological context is concerned, both imperial entities shared the fundamental requirement of being located within the temperate zone of Eurasia, which thanks to its climate, flora, and fauna had long favored the development of social complexity and large polities.[3] The two empires also had in common a division into two different ecological spheres: in the case of Rome, a Mediterranean core and a continental European northern periphery, and, in China, a loess and river plain core and a hotter and wetter southern periphery. In both cases, albeit well after the end of antiquity, the locus of development eventually shifted into these former peripheries. However, the environment also accounted for substantial differences, most notably the fact that the Roman Empire centered on a temperate sea core that was highly conducive to communication, the transfer of goods and people, and the projection of power, whereas China consists of river valleys that are separated by mountain ranges and, at least prior to the creation of ambitious canal systems from the sixth century C.E. onward, posed far greater physical obstacles to integration. Moreover, whereas the main western rivers such as the Rhône, Danube, and Nile converge upon the inner sea core, Chinese rivers all flow eastward, thereby reinforcing regional separation. In view of these differences, one might suspect that *ceteris paribus*, western Eurasia was more likely to end up politically united than its eastern counterpart. On the other hand, China is more compact (in terms of the ratio of surface area to border length) and self-contained, well shielded by mountains and sea on three sides, and open only to the arid Central Asian steppe. By contrast, the temperate ecumene in western Eurasia extends twice as far west-east from the Atlantic into eastern Iran and is endowed with a much more permeable frontier to the northeast that used to facilitate movement by agriculturalists and nomads alike. We must ask whether and to what extent these contrasting features help account for the fact that while the Chinese "core" (conservatively defined as the region controlled by the Qin Empire at the time of its maximum extension in 214 B.C.E.) was united for 936 of

2. I refer to this process as the "*First* Great Divergence" in order to distinguish it from the better-established (second) "Great Divergence," a moniker that Pomeranz 2000 applied to the technological and economic expansion of the "West" during the last two centuries.

3. Diamond 2005.

the past 2,220 years, or 42 percent of the time, the corresponding tally for the section of the western ecumene that was under Roman rule at the death of Augustus in 14 C.E. is perhaps three and a half centuries, or merely 18 percent of the past 1,998 years.[4] More importantly, for the past sixteen centuries, the latter score has been exactly zero. Only the Umayyad Empire ever managed to stretch all the way from the Atlantic to the Indus, and that only for some forty years.

3. Parallels

Both the Roman and Qin-Han empires were built on templates provided by antecedent states and expanded into a widening ecumene: in the West, from the river cultures of the Middle East into the Mediterranean and on to continental Europe, in the East from the Wei and middle Yellow River valleys into the Central Plain and then on to the south. In the East, the basic context had been created by the Shang-Western Zhou polities (*c.* 1600–771 B.C.E.) and their dominant elite culture and the spread of the Western Zhou garrison cities across the Central Plain region. In the Mediterranean, this role had been performed by the dissemination of Greek settlements across the Mediterranean littoral (from the eighth century B.C.E) and the cultural Hellenization of autonomous local elites.

Back in 1994, Christian Gizewski proposed a useful nine-phase parallel model of the development of the Qin-Han and the Roman states, which, in somewhat modified form, can be used to illustrate the striking degree of parallel movements at the most basic level of state formation.[5] The first stage (down to about 500 B.C.E.) witnessed the creation of polities at the western margins of a much wider ecumene, a positioning that favored a focus on military capability, in both Rome and Qin. The main difference was that whereas Qin was already tied into a wider state system, the feudal network of Western Zhou, Rome, farther removed from the "Great Powers" of the Levant, was autonomous and embedded only in regional city state clusters (Latins and Etruscans). At the second stage, in the fifth and into the fourth centuries B.C.E., both entities grew into autonomous middling powers and experienced conflict with comparable competitors: within central Italy in the case of Rome, and in the "land within the passes" (*Guanzhong*) in the case of Qin. Both polities continued to retain their independence because they were physically shielded from "Great Power" conflicts in more developed regions farther east. Making the most of their "marcher state advantage," this allowed them to accumulate military capabilities without encountering the superior absorptive capacity of more powerful states. The third phase resulted in hegemonic power over a large sector of the ecumene in the

4. For the first estimate, see Hui forthcoming. This supersedes her earlier calculations in Hui 2005: 257–8. Owing to frequent usurpations in the third and fourth centuries C.E., Roman unity is more difficult to measure.

5. Gizewski 1994, with my own revisions.

fourth and early third centuries B.C.E., all over Italy for Rome and expansion into Sichuan in the case of Qin. Once again, this growth occurred without triggering major conflict with the leading powers of their respective *koine* but nevertheless brought it closer, driven by Rome's encroachment on the Greeks in Italy and Qin pressure on the kingdom of Wei in China. Both Rome and Qin benefited from low protection costs thanks to strong natural borders, the sea and Alps in Italy and mountain ranges in Qin and Sichuan. Successful expansion strengthened Rome's aristocratic collective leadership and Qin's monarchy (this difference in regime type will be considered below). The fourth step brought hegemony over the entire core ecumene in a series of high-stakes wars, in the third through first centuries B.C.E. in Rome and in a more compressed format in the third century B.C.E. in China. In both cases, hegemony preceded direct rule, although the protobureaucratization of Qin facilitated more rapid outright annexation than the much more limited administrative capabilities of the oligarchic regime in Rome. Also in both cases, large-scale conquest triggered violent adjustment processes: in the East, a shift from the "war-machine" state of Qin to the less overtly centralized regime of the early Han, and in the West a more protracted transition that replaced the established oligarchy with a military monarchy. Owing to the more profound character of this latter shift, conflict in Rome was more sustained, but in both cases the result was the same: a monarchy with, at least at first, strong aristocratic participation.

The fifth stage, in the first two centuries C.E. in Rome and from the second century B.C.E. to the second century C.E. in Han, was characterized by slowing expansion and increasing internal homogenization. In both cases, we witness the strengthening of powerful local elites who cooperated with the state but also constrained its range of action. This process was interrupted in phase 6 by warlordism and temporary fragmentation in the third century C.E., a crisis that was more readily contained by the professional military of the Roman Empire than by the warlords of Three Kingdoms China. The seventh phase of attempted restoration was much more prolonged and at least temporarily successful in Rome than in the internally riven state of Jin but in both cases ended in barbarian conquest, from the early fourth century C.E. in northern China and from the early fifth century C.E. in the western Roman Empire. The subsequent phase 8 saw the already-mentioned division into rump states in the Roman East and the Chinese South and "barbarian" successor states closer to the northern frontiers. In both cases, conquerors increasingly merged with local elites, and transcendent religions that claimed autonomy from the state—Christianity and Buddhism—made considerable progress. Sixth century C.E. attempts at reunification were more successful in China than in the Mediterranean. However, it was only afterward, in phase 9, that developments finally diverged sharply, between the Tang consolidation in the East and the near-destruction of the East Roman or "Byzantine" state by Persians and Arabs and the subsequent political fragmentation of

both the Islamic and the Frankish successor states, a process that was particularly prolonged and intense in western Europe. These developments mark the onset of the "First Great Divergence" that led to the creation of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing empires in China, culminating in the current People's Republic, and to the gradual entrenchment of state polycentrism in Europe.

4. Convergence

Convergent trends in state formation were not lastingly impeded by substantial initial differences in regime type and state organization. The most obvious difference between Rome and China lay in the increasing centralization of the Warring States period that created stronger state structures than anywhere in Europe prior to the modern period.[6] Put in the most general terms, the Warring States of China implemented parallel self-strengthening reforms designed to increase their military competitiveness vis-à-vis their rivals. In the fourth and third centuries B.C.E., the state of Qin went the farthest by breaking the power of hereditary nobles, reorganizing its entire territory into thirty-one uniform conscription districts (*xian*), creating a pathway grid across the country, ranking the entire population in eighteen grades and dividing it into groups of five and ten for collective surveillance and liability, instituting rewards for military prowess, imposing codified penal law, and standardizing currency, weights, and measures. These reforms, however imperfectly they may have been implemented in practice, went some way in creating a homogeneous territorial state, sought to extend state control across all levels of society, concentrated power in the hands of the king, raised both the power of the state and the autonomy of the central government to unprecedented levels, and reputedly enabled Qin to mobilize and deploy military and corvée work forces numbering in the hundreds of thousands. In forthcoming work, Dingxin Zhao argues that this development was ultimately a function of prolonged inconclusive warfare between fairly evenly matched competitors, an environment in which only intensification could produce decisive outcomes.[7] When the state of Qin finally absorbed its six rivals in the 230s and 220s B.C.E., the regime of the First Emperor attempted to impose and perpetuate this system across China. In the novel absence of the centripetal force of interstate competition, this endeavor triggered resistance that rapidly overthrew the Qin regime and led to a reassertion of regional forces that underwrote the establishment of the Han monarchy. It took the new dynasty at least half a century to curtail regional and aristocratic autonomy, a process that was aided by conflict with the Xiongnu, confirming the principle that war making precipitates state

6. Li 1977; Lewis 1990: 54–67; Kiser and Cai 2003. See also Nathan Rosenstein's discussion in chapter 2. For comparisons with Europe, see Hui 2005.

7. Zhao 2006 and forthcoming.

making. After the temporary displacement of the Han dynasty during the Wang Mang usurpation in the early first century C.E. and ensuing civil war, the clock was once again set back 200 years, restoring much power to regional cliques and magnates. In the end, the growing power of provincial gentry and commanders-turned-warlords conspired to undermine and finally eliminate the central government in the late second and early third centuries C.E.[8]

In the last three centuries B.C.E., Rome accomplished conquests on the same scale as Qin that were not accompanied by comparable intensification of government. In both cases, however, successful expansion was made possible by mass conscription of peasants. In the fourth century B.C.E., when Rome faced competitors of comparable strength and military organization within the Italian peninsula, it introduced a series of self-strengthening reforms that echoed many of Qin's reforms in the same period, albeit usually in a more muted fashion: the introduction of direct taxation to fund war making (*tributum*); the strengthening of the peasantry by abolishing debt-bondage; the expansion of conscription across the entire citizenry; periodic registration of adult men; the creation of thirty-five conscription districts (*tribus*), functionally at least in some ways comparable to the thirty-one *xian* of Qin; land grants to soldiers drawing on annexed territories; and political reform to accommodate social mobility at the elite level.[9] Beginning in 295 B.C.E., and certainly after 202 B.C.E, Rome did not normally face state-level competitors with matching mobilization potentials. This, and the consequent absence of prolonged inconclusive warfare against other states, obviated the need for farther-reaching domestic reforms promoting centralization and bureaucratization. In other words, the benefits of asymmetric warfare (against states that relied more on mercenaries in the eastern and southern Mediterranean and against less complex chiefdoms and tribes in the northern and western periphery) enabled Rome to succeed with less domestic restructuring than was required in the intensely competitive environment of Warring States China.[10]

Moreover, protobureaucratization was logically incompatible with the governmental arrangements of the Roman Republic, which was controlled by a small number of aristocratic lineages that relied on social capital, patronage relationships, and the manipulation of ritual performances to maintain power, and more mundanely drew on their own friends, clients, slaves, and freedmen to fulfill key administrative tasks.[11] Tightly regimented popular political participation

8. See chapters 1–5 in Twitchett and Loewe 1986, and Lewis 2007: 253–64.

9. E.g., Cornell 1995: chapters 12–15, as well as the reforms conventionally ascribed to "king Servius Tullius" discussed in his chapter 7.

10. For Rome's eastern competitors, see, e.g., Aperghis 2004: 189–205; Chaniotis 2005. In the second century B.C.E., the bulk of Roman military manpower was directed against "barbarians": Brunt 1987: 422–34; and for much of the first century B.C.E., war against other Romans or Italians required the largest commitments: ibid. 435–512. When Eckstein 2006 claims that Republican Rome found itself in an unusually competitive anarchic environment, he fails to appreciate the more severe nature of conflict in Warring States China.

11. Schulz 1997 and Eich 2005: 48–66 are the best analytical accounts.

provided a benign arbitration device equivalent to the services that in more conventionally organized states would have been furnished by a weak monarch. Financial management, which required a greater concentration of human capital, was largely farmed out to private contractors. In this context, the army was the only institution that attained a certain level of professionalization. This, in turn, laid the groundwork for the increasing autonomy of military power near the end of the Republic, which facilitated warlordism and the creation of a military monarchy.

In terms of Michael Mann's distinction of the four main sources of social power,[12] the oligarchic regime of the Roman conquest state was maintained as long as political, military, and ideological power were closely tied together and controlled by the same aristocratic collective. Once military power broke free from political and ideological constraints, the rule of the collective was replaced by warlords and monarchs, who came to rely on a fully professionalized army and managed political power through the traditional mechanisms of patronage and patrimonialism. The main difference to China is that in China, military power was mostly (though by no means always) successfully contained and for long periods even marginalized by political-ideological power. The near-perfect Han fusion of political and ideological power was a function of the centralizing reforms of the Warring States period and the subsequent adoption of a hybrid Confucian-Legalist belief system that reinforced state authority.[13] Except in the early city-state phase of the Roman polity, Roman regimes never benefited from a comparably close linkage of political and ideological power. Economic power was arguably less constrained in the West than in China, which allowed the Qin and Han states to aim for greater interference in economic affairs, an approach that the Roman state only belatedly adopted from the late third century C.E. onward.

Over time, both systems experienced what one might call a "normalization" of the degree of state control, in the sense of a regression to the mean, the mean being defined as the range of conditions observed in most premodern imperial states. In a manner of speaking, Warring States Qin and Republican Rome started out at opposite ends of the spectrum: Qin was unusually centralized and bureaucratized, whereas Rome was run by a collective and greatly depended on private administrative resources. These dramatic differences may have affected the differential pace of conquest but did not impact ultimate outcomes, that is, eventual domination of the entire ecumene. Over time, both political systems converged, a process that began around 200 B.C.E. in China and in the late first century B.C.E. in Rome. It is the mature Roman Empire of the fourth century

12. For the concept, see Mann 1986: 22–32. Cf. now chapters 6–9 in Hall and Schroeder, eds. 2006.

13. See now especially Zhao's work referred to above (n. 7). For legalism, see Fu 1996; on the legalist permeation of Han-period state Confucianism, see Lewis 2007.

C.E. that most resembles the Han Empire in institutional as well as practical terms.[14] Both empires were divided into around 100 provinces with separate civilian and military leadership that were in turn supervised by about a dozen inspectors ("vicars" and "shepherds," respectively); the central administration was organized around a number of ministries (the *praefectus praetorio*, *magister officiorum*, *praepositus sacri cubiculi*, and *magister militum* in Rome, the "Three Excellencies" and "Nine Ministers" in China); the "inner" court and its agents, including eunuchs, had gradually gained influence relative to formal state institutions, while the emperors became increasingly sequestered. Even child emperors managed by powerful regents, who had long been common in China but rare in Rome, eventually appeared in the later Roman Empire.

In the final analysis, the major differences in political and administrative organization between Rome and China can be explained by initial differences in regime type. In the case of Rome, collective aristocratic rule accounted for an early reluctance to annex, for the lack of bureaucracy not just during the Republic but also during the first three centuries of the monarchy, and for the continuing use of aristocrats as delegates of the ruler and as his military commanders for the same three-hundred-year period. In China, by contrast, centralization, the creation of territorial states, and the disempowerment of aristocrats facilitated rapid annexation and bureaucratic expansion. A second variable, the nature of interstate conflict, mediated political structure, as the shift to "asymmetric" conflict may have helped extend the shelf-life of Roman oligarchy, whereas prolonged inconclusive "symmetric" warfare in China rewarded centralization and concentration of power.[15] But this is not to say that oligarchic traditions continued to constrain Roman state formation indefinitely. As soon as an impetus for reform had been provided by the military and political crisis of the mid-third century C.E., Roman state institutions rapidly converged with those of the Han state: a strong numerical expansion of the bureaucracy, homogenization of registration and taxation, the separation of military and civilian administration, the creation of formal hierarchies and spheres of competence in administration, and the severing of traditional ties between the ruler and his court on the one hand and the capital and its hinterland on the other.[16]

The common notion that early imperial China was considerably more "bureaucratized" than the Roman Empire inflates actual differences. First of all, the number of senior positions was essentially the same in both states, a few hundred in

14. Compare Bielenstein 1980 and chapters 7–8 in Twitchett and Loewe, eds. 1986 with Demandt 1989: 211–72 or Kelly 2004.

15. In the case of Rome, the main counterfactual outcomes would have been a shift to monocracy in response to greater-than-historical interstate competition (a scenario made plausible by the well-attested tendency to prolong and expand individual commands in times of crisis) or state failure if oligarchic institutions had proven too resilient. Real-life analogies to the latter outcome are furnished by preimperial Chinese states that failed to curtail aristocratic power.

16. See now esp. Eich 2005: 338–90.

each case. Second, even before the reforms in late antiquity did Roman governors draw on the services of thousands of seconded soldiers as well as their own slaves and freedmen while the *familia Caesaris*, the patrimonial staff of the emperors, must have contained thousands of slaves and ex-slaves. By 400 C.E., the Roman state employed over 30,000 civilian officials, compared to around four times as many in Western Han China.[17] The principal shift between the early and the later monarchical state in Rome was from the ad hoc use of soldiers and the intense patrimonialism of relying on slaves and ex-slaves to the use of a salaried civilian workforce. The most significant differences between Rome and China were retained at the city level. For one, Han cities did not feature self-governing city councils or elections. For another, a recently discovered provincial archive from the end of the Western Han period indicates that just as in later and better documented periods of Chinese history, even low-level government officials were recruited from outside the province they served in.[18] Thus, while many of the one hundred thousand-odd provincial administrators and clerks on the Han government payroll may well have come from a similar (local elite or "gentry") background as the more than one hundred thousand men who populated the city councils of the Roman Empire, the two groups operated in rather different social contexts, as leaders of their own communities in the latter case and as more detached state agents in the former. Moreover, Roman cities relied more heavily on public slaves than on salaried officials.[19] Only very late were Roman cities assigned an external *curator rei publicae* or *defensor civitatis*.[20] Even so, we may wonder if ultimate outcomes differed greatly: shielding of resources by local elites in the Roman Empire and rent seeking by imported Han officials would both have interfered with revenue collection on behalf of the state. It would be unwise to overestimate the meritocratic dimension of early Chinese officialdom: many Han state agents obtained office via recommendation, that is, through straightforward patronage, just as in Rome; others bought offices, as in the later Roman Empire.[21] In quantitative terms, instruction at the imperial academy was a fringe phenomenon, producing only a relatively small number of graduates each year, and even in Rome, where formal credentialing remained unknown, certain kinds of officials came to benefit from having studied law.[22]

17. Kelly 2004: 111 and 268, n. 9; Loewe 1986: 466.

18. See now Loewe 2004: 38–88, on the Yinwan documents from *c.*10 B.C.E.

19. Wei 2004. For Han city-level officials, see Bielenstein 1980: 99–104.

20. Langhammer 1973: 165–75.

21. Compare Bielenstein 1980: 132–42 to Saller 1982. By the late imperial period, the Roman state had created elite echelons that depended to a large degree on office holding, while the Han state, notwithstanding pretensions to meritocracy, also favored recruitment of the propertied for governmental service. This suggests that the distinction between Rome as an empire run by an elite of property owners and China as an empire of office holders (Wood 2003: 26–32) is overdrawn.

22. Bielenstein 1980: 138–41; Ausbüttel 1998: 178–9. Although statutes found in an early Han tomb at Zhangjiashan (Hubei province) indicate that entry examinations appear to have been more widespread than one might previously have thought (*Zhangjiashan* 2001: 46–7, 203–4), it is nevertheless likely that qualified clerks remained scarce. (I owe this reference to Enno Giele.)

In the end, even the vaunted separation of military and civilian administration in China and the containment of military power by political-ideological power failed quite spectacularly. It is true that in Rome, military power had long been more autonomous than in China; yet by the late second century C.E., China was rapidly catching up with and soon surpassing corrosive Roman habits and likewise began to suffer at the hands of military pretenders and usurpers. In both cases, moreover, we observe infiltration by "barbarian" settlers, Xiongnu, Xianbei, and Qian in China, Goths, Burgundians, and others in the West, groups that nominally accepted imperial rule but increasingly exercised political autonomy.[23] In both cases, the introduction of this element perturbed the extractive-coercive equilibrium between local elites and the central government, eroded the state's monopoly on the sale of protection, interfered with revenue collection, and ultimately prompted bargains between local elites and outsiders that undermined central government. In the ensuing successor states in both East and West, foreign conquerors and indigenes were initially kept apart and subject to separate registration procedures, the former as warriors, the latter as producers of extractable surplus. In both cases, these barriers eroded over time, and we witness a synthesis of foreign and local elites.[24]

5. Divergence

Trajectories of state formation signally diverged from the sixth century C.E. onward.[25] At that time, Justinian's attempted reunification of the original Roman Empire was only partially successful, and the following century witnessed the diminution of the East Roman state at the hands of Persians, Avars, and most importantly Arabs. Hamstrung by the autonomy of their regional armies, the Arab conquerors were unable to establish a durable ecumenical empire.[26] After the failure of Charlemagne's imperial revival, political fragmentation throughout western Eurasia intensified during the late first millennium C.E., most notably in Christian Europe, where states lost the ability to control and tax populations and sovereignty de facto came to be shared among monarchs, lords, local strongmen, semi-independent towns, and clergy. The (re-)creation of centralized states was a drawn-out process that primarily unfolded during the first half of the second millennium C.E. but in some cases took even longer, resulting in a cluster of polities in which balancing mechanisms prevented the creation of a core-wide empire.[27] Instead, intense interstate competition,

23. De Crespigny 1984; Wolfram 1997; Heather 2006; Goffart 2006.

24. Most concisely, Wickham 2001; Graff 2002: chapters 3 and 5.

25. For more detailed discussion, see Scheidel forthcoming b.

26. Kennedy 2001: chapters 1–3.

27. For this process, see esp. Tilly 1992; Spruyt 1994; Ertman 1997. See Hui 2005 for an innovative comparative analysis of balancing in early modern Europe and its eventual failure in Warring States China.

internal social and intellectual upheavals, the creation of new kinds of maritime empire, and (eventually) technological progress gave rise to the modern nation state in the eighteenth (or perhaps only nineteenth) century. In sixth century C.E. China, by contrast, imperial reunification restored the bureaucratic state that largely succeeded, albeit with substantial interruptions, in maintaining a core-wide empire under Chinese or foreign leadership until 1911 and, in effect, up to the present day.

Why did this happen? In principle, a whole variety of factors may have been relevant. For instance, the larger size of the western ecumene was more conducive to fragmentation: China lacked state-level competitors of the caliber of the Persians and Arabs. Climatic change in the second half of the first millennium C.E. may have benefited northern China more than Europe. The Sino-"barbarian" successor states were more adept at containing movement in the steppe, whereas European regimes were vulnerable to Avars, Slavs, Bulgarians, Magyars, and Vikings. China was spared the two hundred years of recurrent plague that ravaged the early medieval West.[28] The contribution of ideological power also requires consideration. The Sinological tradition habitually emphasized the long-term impact of Confucian elite traditions (or rather of the Confucian-Legalist version that had been created in the Western Han period), which favored the notion of a well-ordered unified state managed by scholarly civilian bureaucrats. However, the significance of ideational forces needs to be evaluated in a comparative context: in this case, we must give due weight to the comparative lack of substantive political impact of ideological commitments to Christian unity in the post-Roman West, of attempts to harness the notion of "eternal Rome" for empire building (as in the case of Charlemagne and the Ottonians), and of the Islamic ideal of the unity of the *umma*. Moreover, the post-Han period in China was characterized by increased competition from rival belief systems, such as Daoism and Buddhism. The temporary efflorescence of Buddhist monasteries in the Northern Wei period even suggests a measure of convergence between developments in early medieval China and late Roman and post-Roman Europe, where the clerical establishment accumulated vast resources, eclipsed the state in its access to human capital, and eventually came to share in its sovereignty.[29] Nevertheless, it is true that Confucian scholars provided a suitable instrument of state management, whereas the absence of an equivalent group in the Christian West may have made it more difficult for post-Roman regimes to maintain or restore a "strong" state: the intrinsically autonomous and schismatically riven Christian churches that had evolved outside and in some sense in opposition to the imperial state could not offer comparable services. Abiding frictions between

28. For discussion, see Adshead 2000: 58–64. For the putative impact of the plague, see now Little 2007 and more sweepingly Rosen 2007.

29. On the early Buddhist expansion, see Demiéville 1986: 846–72.

political and ideological power in the post-Roman world may have impeded the strengthening of state capacity and thus successful empire building.

However, while state capabilities would necessarily have been influenced by these and other contextual features, causal analysis ought to focus more narrowly on the ways in which differences in state-society relations shaped trends in overall state formation. Chris Wickham has proposed an explanatory model of proximate causation for large parts of postancient western Eurasia that can also be used to shed light on contrasting developments in East Asia.[30] In brief, the "strong" Roman state (which counted and taxed a demilitarized population in order to support a large standing army) was succeeded in part by states that maintained systems of taxation and salaried military forces (the East Roman and Arab states) and in part by weak or weakening states whose rulers gradually lost the ability to count and tax their subjects (the Germanic successor states in the west), while in some marginal areas, state institutions collapsed altogether (such as in Britain). In "strong" states with registration, taxation, and centrally controlled military forces, rulers enjoyed greater autonomy from elite interests, and elites depended to a significant degree on the state (for offices, salaries, and other perquisites) to maintain their status. In "weak" states, elites relied more on the resources they themselves controlled and enjoyed greater autonomy from rulers. In the absence of centralized tax collection and coercive capabilities, the power of rulers largely depended on elite cooperation secured through bargaining processes. From the perspective of the general population, local elites rather than state rulers and their agents dominated, and feudal relationships were a likely outcome. At the same time, in the absence of the kind of transregional integration that is characteristic of "strong" states, elites tended to be less disproportionally wealthy. These conditions had profound consequences for economic performance, eroding interregional exchange in and among "weak" states. Over time, even the relatively "strong" post-Roman successor states experienced a decline of state taxation and salaried military forces, most notably in seventh- and eight-century Byzantium. The Umayyad Empire also suffered from the regionalization of revenue collection and military power.[31] In this context of fiscal decline and decentralization of political and military power, it became more difficult to maintain state capabilities (especially in the military sphere), and the prospects for the creation of very large stable empires were poor.

In terms of state capacity, developments in early medieval China differed quite dramatically from conditions in much of western Eurasia. The late fifth and sixth centuries C.E. in particular witnessed the gradual restoration of Han-style governmental institutions that enabled rulers to count and tax a growing proportion of their subjects, curb elite autonomy, and mobilize ever larger resources

30. Wickham 2005. I also draw here on the review by Sarris 2006b for a convenient summary.
31. For the East Roman state, see esp. Haldon 1997.

for military efforts that eventually resulted in imperial reunification.[32] Serious challenges to recentralization, such as intense conflict between rival nomadic groups and the emergence of large numbers of fortified settlements that were organized around clans and village units and designed to protect (and hence secure local control over) the agricultural population, were eventually contained: in consequence, radically different outcomes were avoided, such as feudalization and long-term fragmentation across China—a real-life counterfactual that had indeed already materialized on a previous occasion, back in the early Spring and Autumn period in the eighth century B.C.E.[33] This raises the question of why the foreign conquest elites succeeded in shoring up state capabilities where their western counterparts failed. The nature of antecedent governmental institutions and differences in the compensation of military forces (most notably between the state-managed allocation of goods in the East versus the assignation of land in parts of the West) and their organization (a predominance of cavalry or infantry) may all have played a critical role. All these issues call for further investigation. A comparative perspective will be essential in identifying factors that precipitated dramatically different long-term outcomes in East and West: the famous "dynastic cycle(s)" in China and the resilient polycentrism of the medieval and modern European state system.

32. See esp. Eberhard 1965; Pearce 1987; Lewis forthcoming. For evidence of continuing taxation in the "Period of Disunion," see Yang 1961: 140–8; for an example of continuity in bureaucratic practice, see Dien 2001.

33. Cf. Tang 1990: 123–4; Huang 1997: 77.