

disciples, as well as their transmission of Qingwei ritual texts in Jiangxi (254–255). Juxtaposing what Wang describes as “demonstrated transmission” and “stipulated transmission” of Liu’s Qingwei and Jingming lineages in Jiangxi in chapter 7 would have allowed a more coherent presentation of the lineage’s historical and reconstructed presence. The Conclusion could have offered a more robust analysis of how the Liu Yuanran lineage’s geographical expansion and regional transformations provide new insights into state-society interactions in the Ming empire.

The book also has several minor flaws that hinder its overall clarity and coherence. The long paragraphs sometimes obscure analysis. For example, a single paragraph about a salt merchant who became a Daoist priest spans more than an entire page (182–184), and another paragraph discussing a Xia lineage’s involvement in local temple festivals covers pages 216–218. The second flaw lies in the obscurity of certain sources the book uses. In several instances, Wang mentions a database he created, which enabled him to reconstruct the Liu Yuanran Qingwei lineage by matching the ordination names of Liu’s master and disciples with a reconstructed lineage poem (see 157, 169). It would have been beneficial to provide an appendix explaining what the database includes and how he constructed it; readers cannot assess the persuasiveness of the arguments that rely on a set of unidentified sources. Last, the book frequently incorporates extensive quotations from the works of other scholars; constructive dialogue would have asserted Wang’s own voice more prominently.

Lineages Embedded in Temple Networks is by no means the final word on the interactions of Daoism and Ming state and society. Yet, as the first book-length study on the topic in English scholarship, it is an important addition to both Daoist studies and Ming history, greatly expanding our understanding of the religious dimension of the Ming state apparatus as well as the local, social dimensions of the Daoist lineage movement in late imperial China. The ongoing ramifications of the similarly complex interactions between religion, local organizations, and the state in contemporary China after the 1980s make this book essential reading for students of Chinese religions and local societies well beyond the Ming period.

The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development

By Yuhua Wang. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.
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Why did the Chinese empire last for two millennia, only to decline at the end of the nineteenth century? And what fundamental principles can China’s example suggest

to explain why some states in world history have prospered and others have failed? Wang Yuhua, in his new book, *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China*, seeks to answer these questions. He explores China's history from the Tang Dynasty (618–907) to the fall of the Qing in 1911, basing his analysis on datasets and sophisticated statistics, including regression analysis. Wang is a specialist of government; his book is thus primarily meant to be read by political scientists. Nevertheless, Chinese historians will find the overarching thesis, as well as many of the arguments in individual chapters, to be both engaging and illuminating. Notably, Wang offers a new way of conceptualizing the “localist turn”—usually associated with the Southern Song—and its impact on China's state–society relations. The author can also be commended for his critique of the eurocentrism of his own discipline, and for placing China's history into the political science conversation.

The central contention of the book is that state development (both the forms states assume and whether they are strong or weak) depends at the most fundamental level on the “elite social terrain”—meaning here the marriage and kinship ties connecting “central elites” to “local social groups” (7). Wang envisions three ideal types of elite social terrains, each associated with a particular state–society relationship (14). In a “star network,” which existed according to Wang during the Tang Dynasty, central elites have close ties both to each other and to local elites in the provinces. This particular configuration produces a weak *monarch* who faces a powerful elite, but a strong *state*, because that state's interests align with those of the elite. In a “bowtie network”—which Wang argues characterized China from the Song Dynasty until the nineteenth century—the central elite is divided into factions, each with its own network of connections to local society. The monarch is strong vis-à-vis the fragmented central elite, but the state is relatively weak in relation to an entrenched local elite. Wang refers to the paradox of the monarch gaining authority at the expense of state strength as the “sovereign's dilemma.” Finally, in a “ring network,” factions within the central elite have close ties neither to each other nor to local elites. According to Wang, this configuration reflected the situation in post-Opium War China, when state authority crumbled as government functions were entirely taken over by local private-order institutions.

Clearly, in Wang's model, state development is determined not by the economic foundation of society (as Marxists and other materialists would have it), nor by the quality and strength of government institutions (as traditional historians in China have tended to assume). There is also no significant place for cultural particularities, nor for historical contingency. Instead, the structure of the elite determines state development. My own inclination is in fact to agree with Wang: when assessing a state's stability and its capacity to exert authority, I tend to see the ways in which a bureaucrat fits into broader elite social networks to be more consequential than how the bureaucrat's office fits into institutional hierarchies. I would thus expect elite kin networks to have a far-reaching impact on the political world. I also find Wang's analysis of long-durée trends on the basis of large datasets to be an appealing methodology. Some of the clever metrics the author devises would be well worth adapting to other scholarly projects. Nevertheless, I also have some fundamental disagreements with Wang, and will propose ways in which his model might be refined to better fit the historical data.

The Rise and Fall of Imperial China is divided into nine chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction that gives a synopsis of the argument and its theoretical foundation, framed for political scientists. Chapter 2 provides a big-picture overview of China's state–society relationship over the two millennia of imperial rule, and introduces the most important metrics used in the book. To assess the elite social terrain, Wang

measures both the “social fractionalization” of “major officials” (i.e., the degree to which these officials were connected to each other by a single, large marriage network), as well as the major officials’ “kinship network localization” (i.e., the geographic dispersal of their marriage ties). To evaluate state power, he looks at the state’s fiscal system, most notably by assessing per capita tax revenue. To evaluate the monarch’s authority, he looks at the average reign length of emperors, as well as the frequency of palace coups. Finally, the chapter attempts to establish correlations between climate anomalies, mass rebellions, and external invasions.¹

Following the introductory material, the next six chapters deal in turn with historical periods from the Tang through the Qing, each chapter offering a historical overview focusing on questions of elite social structure, state–society relations, and the fiscal and military foundations of state power. These overviews are primarily for political scientists who do not specialize in China. Historians may quibble with points of detail and with some of the oversimplification. But such criticisms would have little bearing on Wang’s overarching argument. Each chapter also supports some of its main contentions with one or more “original” datasets.² Chapter 6, for example, demonstrates that the number of years needed for a prefecture to implement the late-Ming Single Whip reform increased with the number of major officials who came from that prefecture. Chapters 7 and 8 use the publication dates of lineage genealogies to quantify collective lineage activity by time and place. They then show how this metric correlates with both *jìnshì* success and the frequency of local uprisings. Finally, Chapter 9 shifts course to explain how an understanding of elite social terrain might benefit policymakers seeking to shape state-building projects in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Let me now turn to three specific points of disagreement relevant to my own areas of expertise.

1. A “Star Network” or a “Bull’s Eye” Network?

Elite marriage networks offer a powerful tool for understanding state–society relations. A case in point is Wang’s notion of a “bowtie network,” which I find to be exceptionally useful for conceptualizing Chinese state–society relations after the “localist turn” of the Southern Song. Localism incorporated a number of interconnected elements, including a change in family strategy, as members of the elite came to see that their future lay in provincial society and not in the service of the central government; a concomitant shift from a “court-oriented” to a “*shì* [literati]-oriented” elite culture; a new “social contract,” in which a provincially based elite took over many state functions, including local defense and social welfare; a novel ideology promoting “voluntarism” as an alternative to government service; and a much broader geographic dispersal of political power.³ Finally, and of particular relevance here, localism entailed a shift in marriage

¹I will not address the author’s analysis of climate anomalies in this review.

²Some of these datasets clearly derive from the work of others. For example, Figures 2.5a and 4.4a are visualizations of my own data.

³Robert P. Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Robert Hymes, “Sung Society and Social Change,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol.5, Pt.2, edited by John W. Chaffee and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 631–32; Robert P. Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer, eds., *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3; Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 246–56; Nicolas Tackett, “Imperial Elites, Bureaucracy, and the Transformation of the Geography of Power in Tang-Song China,” in *Die*

patterns, such that members of the central elite ceased to intermarry with each other in order to entrench themselves in local elite society.⁴ The consequence was a dissolution of the horizontal bonds between members of the central elite, and the strengthening of vertical links connecting them to social groups in the provinces—vertical links defined first and foremost by kinship ties, as the “bowtie” model suggests.⁵

Wang’s analysis of the earlier Tang period, however, is much more problematic. Specifically, the “star network” misrepresents the basic structure of Tang elite society. The Tang bureaucracy was dominated by a tightly knit marriage network of capital-based clans, which—contrary to Wang’s claim that capital officials maintained “marriage ties with multiple families with home bases in the provinces” (41)—in fact included the clans of both officials and their in-laws. It is true that the capital region by my definition included the “Capital Corridor” connecting Chang’an to Luoyang, and that there were small pockets of the national elite in two or three of the southern metropolises.⁶ But Wang is simply incorrect to conclude that “while the central officials were concentrated in the capital area, their kin were dispersed across the country” (42). To assess the claim (depicted graphically in Figure 2.5b on p. 41) requires careful examination of the R code and datasets in the “replication package”—which Wang has made available for download to allow the reader to replicate his results.⁷ There are difficulties (e.g., some tables identify individuals only by pinyin names), so I consulted the China Biographical Database (CBDB) and my own very extensive database of Tang individuals.⁸ My conclusion upon scrutinizing a sample of Wang’s data is that the non-capital “kin” appearing in Figure 2.5b are erroneously localized to their ancestral places of clan origin.⁹ This is a fundamental error (which many historians also make), as the Tang great families had almost entirely relocated to the capital region by the end of the seventh century.¹⁰

Interaktion von Herrschern und Eliten in imperialen Ordnungen des Mittelalters, edited by Wolfram Drews (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 184–89.

⁴Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen*, 82–111; Robert P. Hymes, “Marriage, Descent Groups, and the Localist Strategy in Sung and Yuan Fu-chou,” in *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China, 1000–1940*, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrey and James L. Watson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 95–136.

⁵Beginning in the Ming, native-place associations in the capital also played a critical role—a point that Wang does not bring up. See Richard Belsky, *Localities at the Center: Native Place, Space, and Power in Late Imperial Beijing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁶Nicolas Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 70–106.

⁷Yuhua Wang, “Replication Data for: The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development. Princeton University Press,” Harvard Dataverse V1, 2021, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KER9GK>.

⁸CBDB can be accessed at <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cbdb/home>; my database is available at www.ntackett.com.

⁹The sample consisted of all individuals appearing in the file “tang vertex.xlsx” (contained in the replication package) with a hometown situated either north of 38 degrees latitude or west of 105 degrees longitude.

¹⁰Mao Hanguang 毛漢光, “Cong shizu jiguan qianyi kan Tangdai shizu zhi zhongyang hua” 從士族籍貫遷移看唐代士族之中央化, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 52.3 (1981), 421–510; Nicolas Tackett, “The Evolution of the Tang Political Elite and Its Marriage Network,” *Journal of Chinese History* 4.2 (2020), esp. 288–89. It is not entirely clear why in Wang’s data the central official is more likely to be from the capital than his “kin.” In the data, the central official’s ID appears to be equivalent to the individual’s CBDB ID number, suggesting basic data was derived directly from CBDB. By contrast, the “kin” is usually identified with a non-CBDB ID number, perhaps indicating that a different methodology was used to determine the hometown.

One can take the capital official Li Zhengchen 李正臣 as an example. In the replication data, Wang correctly identifies his hometown as the Eastern Capital of Luoyang (and not as Jiangxia 江夏, his place of clan origin).¹¹ But the first ten of Li's kin listed in Wang's dataset consist of family members of his son-in-law Cui Yuanlue 崔元略 (771–830)—including Cui's grandfather, father, and several brothers—and Wang assumes that their hometown was Anping 安平 County, the place of origin of this branch of the Boling Cui 博陵崔 clan.¹² In fact, from other available data, we know that Cui Yuanlue's ancestors had left Anping generations earlier. We know the names of at least thirty-six Cui clan members who were buried in Luoyang beginning in the mid-seventh century.¹³ Indeed, Cui's own epitaph and that of his grandfather, both excavated in recent decades, confirm that the two men were buried in Luoyang.¹⁴ One can point to other such examples in Wang's replication data.¹⁵ Simply put, I see no evidence of a nationwide marriage network in Tang times. What distinguished the Tang sociopolitical elite from its counterpart after the localist turn in the Southern Song was not the geographic dispersal of its kinship network (41–42), but rather its heavy concentration in the capital region.

As an alternative to the “star network,” I would propose a “bull's eye network,” in which dense marriage ties connect central elite families, which, however, maintain no familial connections to local elites. The Tang court in alliance with a strongly cohesive, capital-based aristocracy (i.e., the central elite) dominated provincial society. But it did so not via the aristocracy's marriage network, but rather because local elite families in different parts of the vast provincial periphery could not join forces and stand up to the alliance of imperial power and capital elite families. Under these circumstances, Wang's measure of the “fractionalization” of the marriage network of major officials is considerably more useful than his kinship localization score for contrasting the Tang aristocracy with the political elite after the localist turn. To distinguish the “bull's eye network” from other types of networks, one might also devise metrics quantifying an elite man's

¹¹Li Zhengchen appears with ID=155565 in the files “tang edgelist.xlsx” and “tang vertex.xlsx” contained in the replication package. The longitude–latitude coordinates of his hometown, as recorded in the vertex file, correspond to Luoyang.

¹²The ten members of the Cui clan identified as Li's kin have ID=350 through 359 in Wang's data. Cui Yuanlue appears with ID=138699 in my database, and personid=32113 in CBDB. The hometown of all ten is identified in “tang vertex.xlsx” with longitude–latitude coordinates (115.510575 E, 38.230526 N) corresponding to Anping County.

¹³The clan appears in my database with clanid=7568. There are 33 Luoyang burials in ver. 1.5 of my database (available for download), and 36 in the current version, which will be available for download in the near future.

¹⁴“Tang Cui Yuanlue fufu hezangmu” 唐崔元略夫妇合葬墓, *Wenwu* 2005.2: 52–61; Wu Gang 吳鋼, ed., *Quan Tang wen buyi: Qian Tang zhizhai xincang zhuanji* 全唐文補遺: 千唐誌齋新藏專輯 (Xi'an: San Qin chubanshe, 2006), 257.

¹⁵Wei Guangxian 韋光憲 (ID=159916 in Wang's tables, ID=142344 in my database) constitutes a second example. His six kin listed in “tang edgelist.xlsx” (ID=764 through 769) are all clansmen of his son-in-law Li Daogu 李道古 (769–821) (ID=151496 in my database). Wang correctly identifies Wei as coming from a Chang'an-based family. But he incorrectly localizes Li's six relatives to 104.6356 E, 35.00714 N, i.e. Longxi County in Gansu. In fact, Li Daogu was a sixth-generation direct descendant of Li Shimin (Tang Taizong). Although the Tang imperial clan claimed Longxi as its ancestral home, it had moved away centuries earlier. The surviving epitaphs of Li Daogu and of his father and grandfather all confirm that this branch of the family was buried in Luoyang. See Xie Guanglin 謝光林, ed., *Luoyang Beimang gudai jiazhu mu* 洛陽北邙古代家族墓 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 2015), 215–16, 218–20, 222–23.

probability of attaining high office, or, as I have suggested elsewhere, the degree of concentration at the capital of the clans that produced major officials.¹⁶

2. The Timing of the Elite Transformation

When did the elite transformation take place? Wang explains in Chapter 4 that “the transition happened in the late Tang era” when “a mass rebellion ... destroyed the medieval aristocracy” (94). To demonstrate that a new order was in place by the beginning of the Northern Song, he deploys graphs, including one depicting the dramatic spike in importance of the *jinshi* exam (Figure 4.5 on p. 98)—a phenomenon that has traditionally been treated by historians as marking the appearance of a new elite.¹⁷ Given that Wang’s account of the demise of the aristocracy paraphrases my own book’s conclusion, I have no fundamental objections to this particular element of his account.¹⁸ But the fall of the aristocracy should not be conflated with the “localist turn”: the transformation of the elite entailed a long, multi-step process. The generally accepted model, first articulated by Robert Hartwell, envisions a two-stage transition from aristocracy in the Tang to a national civil-bureaucratic elite in the Northern Song, then to a local elite in the Southern Song.¹⁹ Moreover, as I will suggest, the second stage was itself a complex and drawn-out process.

In contradiction to this model, Wang argues in Chapter 5 that localism had already manifested itself in the eleventh century amid the well-known political factionalism surrounding Wang Anshi’s New Policies. The model derived from Hartwell’s thesis treats this factionalism as discord between members of the national elite; the value of “action from the political center” was taken for granted across the factional divides.²⁰ But Wang argues for a more fundamental transformation. He envisions a rivalry in the Northern Song between two groups. The first was a “patronage-based elite,” whose members tended to gain office through the hereditary *yin* privilege, to engage in cross-regional marriage alliances, to have interests that aligned with those of the state, and to support the New Policies. The second group consisted of “newly-risen scholar-officials,” who were much more likely to gain office through the civil service examinations, to have localized social networks, to focus on local interests and on “keeping the state weak,” and so to oppose the New Policies in favor of local, private-order institutions (106–7). Wang’s evidence to support the existence of this particular dichotomy, however, is problematic.

To give readers a sense of the differences in geographic scope of the marriages of the two elite types, Wang compares the kinship networks of Wang Anshi (1021–1086) and Lü Gongzhu (1018–1089) (Figure 5.2 on p. 122). Wang Anshi’s network is indeed empire-wide, including individuals from the north, from Huainan, as well as from Jiangnan and Sichuan. Lü’s network, by contrast, includes individuals only from the north and from Huainan. But I would point out that even this second network was rather

¹⁶Tackett, “Imperial Elites, Bureaucracy, and the Transformation of the Geography of Power,” 184–89.

¹⁷The “officials of aristocratic descent” appearing in Figure 4.5 probably refer to the “patronage-based elite” described below. In addition, Figure 4.6 depicts a sharp change in kinship network localization scores, though (as noted above) I believe the Tang figures are flawed.

¹⁸Tackett, *Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*, 235–41.

¹⁹Robert M. Hartwell, “Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750–1550,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42.2 (1982), esp. 405–425; Peter K. Bol, *This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in Tang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 32–75.

²⁰Hymes and Schirokauer, *Ordering the World*, 12. It was only in the Southern Song that educated elites “took a far less optimistic and far less ambitious view of central politics and institutions.”

widely dispersed, spanning at least 1100 kilometers—comparable to the distance between Philadelphia and Chicago, or Paris and Rome. Lü's kinship ties were thus a far cry from the elite marriages after the localist turn of the Southern Song, which tended to be restricted to a single county or prefecture. Scale matters here. It was only prefecture- or county-wide marriages that created a kin network that was sufficiently geographically concentrated to permit an elite family strategy of local entrenchment. Despite the author's claim, Wang Anshi and Lü Gongzhu both very much exemplified the national elite of the Northern Song.

In fact, there is an alternative set of correlations more in line with what historians have observed in the past. To explore further the contrast between supporters and opponents of the New Policies, we can once again examine Wang's own R code and datasets. From a list of 137 Northern Song officials, the author identifies—on the basis of his research team's own reading of Northern Song chronicles—63 supporters and opponents of Wang Anshi's reforms.²¹ It is on the basis of this relatively small sample size that Wang concludes that kinship network localization negatively correlates with support for the reforms.²² As an alternative to kinship network localization, I used Wang's data to assess the prefecture of origin of the 22 consistent supporters and 34 consistent opponents of the New Policies whose hometown is identified in the table.²³ I then classified each prefecture into either north (including Shannandong) or south (including Huainan), and also determined the number of Northern Song-era *jinshi* recipients in each respective prefecture.²⁴ I found that 64 percent (14/22) of opponents of the New Policies were northerners, while 71 percent (24/34) of supporters were southerners—reflecting a regional dichotomy that others have previously observed.²⁵ Given that the north remained the center of political power in the Northern Song, one would imagine that upwardly mobile southern elites were more likely to seek northern marriage partners than vice versa. The regional dichotomy thus can explain why Wang found that supporters of the New Policies had more geographically dispersed kin networks. On the question of the exams, it turns out that a substantial percentage of high officials on both sides of the issue had entered the bureaucracy through the exams.²⁶ But there is one notable point of contrast: I found that only 27 percent (6/22) of opponents of the New Policies came from prefectures producing over 100 *jinshi* in the Northern Song, whereas 56 percent (19/34) of supporters came from such high-performing prefectures. It was thus proponents of the New Policies who more likely emerged from a prefectural elite that benefited from the exams. In brief, I see few grounds to conclude that a “newly-risen” examination elite with “local” kinship networks constituted the opposition to Wang Anshi's reforms, as the author argues.

²¹The table in question is the Stata 13 file “Wang Anshi reform data_wk.dta” in the replication package. In the table, the degree of support for the reforms is recorded in the column labeled `support_continuous`. A value of 0 indicates a consistent opponent of the New Policies, 1 indicates a consistent supporter, and a value in between 0 and 1 indicates an occasional supporter. Of the 137 officials, `support_continuous` is left blank in 74 cases, indicating officials who never spoke up either in favor or against the reforms.

²²In fact, in order to take multiple variables into consideration for the regression analysis, Wang bases his conclusions on just “forty politicians for whom I have full information on all the variables” (235).

²³I used `hometown_prefecture_id` to identify the hometown via the `ADDR_CODES` table in CBDB (November 2020 build).

²⁴For *jinshi* recipients by prefecture, I consulted John W. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 196–202.

²⁵See, for example, Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 17–18.

²⁶According to CBDB data, 77 percent (17/22) of opponents and 91 percent (31/34) of supporters of the New Policies had passed the *jinshi* exams.

One can better account for the data by treating the demise of the aristocracy and the rise of localism as two distinct steps occurring at different moments in time. On this issue, Wang's data makes a useful intervention. Robert Hymes' classic work on localism unambiguously dates the phenomenon in Fuzhou, Jiangxi Province, to the Southern Song, when one witnesses a much greater prevalence of intra-county marriages.²⁷ Peter Bol's data from Wuzhou (now Jinhua, Zhejiang Province) complicates the picture, showing both that intra-county marriages there became prevalent somewhat later in the Southern Song, and also that intra-county networks during the Yuan became further geographically constricted to clusters of neighboring villages.²⁸ Wang's data complicates the picture in yet another way. His visualizations of the major officials' marriage networks show that Northern Song and Southern Song networks look very similar (Figure 4.4 on p. 93)—corroborating Beverly Bossler's argument that there survived into the Southern Song a stratum of locally based national elites who continued to specialize in officeholding and to marry nationally.²⁹ But by the late Ming, there was a much greater fractionalization of the marriage network, as shown in Figure 6.3 (150), suggesting that the stratum of national elites described by Bossler had by then disappeared. In sum, Wang's data helps us to see how the phenomenon of localism, first apparent in certain regions of China in the early Southern Song, continued to evolve in complex and interesting ways in subsequent centuries.

3. The Strength of the State in Late Imperial China

Finally, let me address the issue of the “fall” of Imperial China. Did the post-Song state–society relationship produce a fiscally and politically weakened state, culminating in the collapse of the Qing at the turn of the twentieth century? This question is at the heart of the “sovereign's dilemma.” Wang's view is unambiguous: “China's state weakened during the Song–Ming times” (24). His contention aligns with numerous classic accounts of China's long-term development. Nineteenth-century theories of “oriental stagnation” and Naitō Konan's vision of “precocious modernity” in the Song posited that the Chinese empire had become too stable for its own good.³⁰ In more recent decades, theories of post-Song stagnation have taken the guise of modern “social scientific” analysis, as exemplified by Mark Elvin's “high-level equilibrium trap,” as well as the Maddison Project's problematic dataset of historical GDP per capita.³¹

²⁷See, for example, Hymes, “Marriage, Descent Groups, and the Localist Strategy,” 103.

²⁸Peter K. Bol, *Localizing Learning: The Literati Enterprise in Wuzhou, 1100–1600* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2022), 189, 335–36.

²⁹Beverly J. Bossler, *Powerful Relations: Kinship, Status, and the State in Sung China (960–1279)* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1998).

³⁰Richard von Glahn, “Imagining Pre-modern China,” in *The Song–Yuan–Ming Transition in Chinese History*, eds. Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 38–39.

³¹Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 298–315. For the Maddison Project (2010), see www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/. This dataset consists (in the case of pre-nineteenth-century China) of impressionistic estimates based on a set of assumptions, notably that China was indeed stagnating. The Maddison data's implausibly flat per capita GDP for China between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries can be visualized in Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 461.

But historians of Late Imperial China nowadays generally disagree with this premise. Indeed, one could argue that much of the work on Ming–Qing history in English dating to the 1980s and 1990s made it a goal to demonstrate the enduring vitality of China’s state and society. Kenneth Pomeranz, for example, has famously argued that China’s economy did not begin to diverge from the West until around the year 1800, suggesting that “stagnation” did not set in until a much later date.³² Wang counters Pomeranz by citing in a footnote specific scholarship that implies that “stagnation occurred much earlier—in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries” (24). But my sense is that the scholarship Wang cites on this question in fact remains a minority position.

China’s enduring strength in the eighteenth century is best embodied by the extraordinary success of the Qing Dynasty’s empire-building project. It was in this century that the Qing built up one of the largest land empires in world history, perhaps second in size only to the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth century. Wang’s useful graph depicting “external wars” by decade (Figure 2.2 on p. 34) is illustrative of this phenomenon. One finds almost no external wars either at the height of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (late twelfth through early thirteenth centuries) or at the height of the Qing (during the “long” eighteenth century). As a regime with northern origins, the Qing (like the Yuan) benefited from its mastery of political and military techniques necessary to subjugate the forest and steppe tribes of the north. Yet Qing imperial expansion also depended on the eighteenth-century state’s ability to secure a wide range of vital resources.³³ Although the Qing did ultimately “fall,” China’s recent “rise” suggests that the post-Opium War decades may have simply constituted a particularly tumultuous political transition, not fundamentally different from the post-Huang Chao century (880–979)—with the resurgence of a “new China” in the mid-twentieth century analogous to the resurgence of the Chinese empire under the Song.

How does one explain the endurance of China’s strength and vitality following the “localist turn”? Wang treats the fragmented elite of the “bowtie” model as an inherently centrifugal force, pulling the state apart by advocating first and foremost for local interests at the expense of national concerns. But there is another way of looking at it if one’s point of contrast is not the “star network,” but rather the “bull’s eye network,” in which the state forcibly imposes its hegemony upon the provinces. From this alternative perspective, the “bowtie network” constitutes a centripetal force that draws in and stabilizes local societies. More precisely, in the case of China, because every prefecture could at any given moment claim several native sons in the central bureaucracy, the prefectural elite acquired a new stake in the system. Meanwhile, by taking over some state functions (local defense, social welfare, etc.), this prefectural elite helped to make it possible for the state to sustain itself on smaller tax receipts.³⁴ This devolution of state authority might be seen as analogous to the devolution of authority in a federal system (such as one finds in the United States and Switzerland today). The “sovereign’s dilemma” might be recast thus not as the choice to strengthen the monarch at the expense of the state, but rather as the choice to distribute political power and institutional responsibility more evenly across the state’s territory.

³²Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³³Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005).

³⁴An additional factor permitting the state to operate at lower cost was the commercial economy, which facilitated the movement of people and goods. I thank Sarah Schneewind for reminding me of this point.