BOOK REVIEW

The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development, by Yuhua Wang. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022. ISBN 9780691215167.

"This is my dream book," Yuhua Wang begins his preface to *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of the State Development*. The scale of his ambitions—reflected in his title—is formidable. He seeks to unite Chinese history with social science; to write the untold political story of China's "Great Divergence" with the West in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (most treatments are economic); to counterbalance a state formation literature based almost entirely on the Western European experience; and to develop a generalizable theory about the stability and longevity of states. A few quibbles aside, Wang largely succeeds in fulfilling these ambitions. This is an extremely impressive book that stands at the cutting edge of political science.

Wang began this sweeping research project by exploring an intuition: that understanding the structure of elite social relations could "begin to unscramble the many puzzles in China's political development" (xiv). Ruler-elite bargaining is central to many theories of state formation. In Europe, weak elites created representative institutions to enhance their bargaining power vis-à-vis rulers. Simultaneously, the continual pressure of interstate war selected for large states that could monopolize violence, tax effectively, and centrally manage their affairs. These trends resulted in strong, durable states in which institutions held rulers accountable. China, however, followed a different development path. Imperial rule endured for two millennia, executed through "an elite bureaucracy and in partnership with kinship-based organizations" (4). China's development path resulted in a puzzling inverse relationship between imperial durability and state strength: Chinese emperors were surprisingly secure throughout their state's long decline.

Wang's investigation of this puzzle leads him to a compelling theory about state-society relations. He argues that a state's strength, and the form a state takes, follow from the network structure of state-society relations. To operationalize this concept, Wang defines "elite social terrain" as "the ways in which central elites connect local social groups (and link to each other)" (7). He proposes a taxonomy of three archetypal network structures that represent elite social terrain: (1) *star networks* in which central elites connect geographically far-flung groups; (2) *bowtie networks*, in which fragmented elites connect only to their geographically localized groups; and (3) *ring networks*, in which central elites are not connected to each other or any major social groups.

Different types of elite social terrains yield different types of states. In star networks, elites with expansive interests prefer to dispense public goods through

the central state because of its geographic reach and economies of scale. Their concentrated power allows them to overcome collective action problems, mobilize geographically dispersed groups, and constrain the ruler. In bowtie networks, localized elites prefer to supply private goods locally rather than through a remote central government. However, their fragmentation leaves them vulnerable to divide-and-conquer tactics by the ruler. Ring networks provide virtually no accountability for the ruler, because elites cannot meaningfully organize. Each network type leads to a different equilibrium for the form and strength of the state, and exogenous shocks can transition a state from one equilibrium to another.

The bulk of the book applies this framework to China's state development over the past 13 centuries. During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), an aristocratic elite ruled China. A tight-knit marriage network connected elites to social groups across the country, forming a star network. Elites leveraged state strength to protect their widespread interests, but their very centralization left them vulnerable to central rebellion. A ninth-century-CE rebellion destroyed the aristocracy, created a vacuum, and shifted China's elite social terrain into a more fragmented bowtie network. Under the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties (960–1644 CE), elites lacked the interconnections of the earlier Tang Dynasty and represented a host of local interests. Emperors played fractionalized elites against each other, undercutting state strength even as they solidified their own rule. When the Opium Wars of 1830–1860 weakened the state's ability to quell violence and supply public goods, fragmentation accelerated, and elite social relations shifted to resemble a ring network. The state permitted elites to form private militias to tame the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), which accelerated the collapse of the state into warlordism.

Wang buttresses this narrative with dazzling empirical work. He draws on a wide range of preexisting quantitative data sources such as a Chinese catalogue of historical wars, Chinese Academy of Sciences temperature data (to justify a claim about climate change and conflict), and a biographical dataset of major Chinese officials. He also makes impressive use of his own original datasets. Wang has geolocated historical Chinese officials using tombstone epitaphs, digitized and geocoded more than 50,000 genealogies, and built a dataset of 282 Chinese emperors from 221 BCE to 1912 CE. He employs extended analytic narratives that show a deep command of Chinese history, as well as regression, geospatial, and network analyses. Despite the depth and breadth of cutting-edge quantitative work, the book remains approachable to a general audience; most quantitative work is partitioned in a substantial appendix.

Although extremely impressive, the book is not perfect. Wang's use of social network analysis (SNA) tools drifts between literal and metaphorical, potentially creating confusion. When scholars appropriate frameworks from other disciplines, they must be clear about whether they are using the framework literally or metaphorically. For example, generations of political scientists and sociologists claimed to use evolutionary theory to understand social systems but employed it as only a loose metaphor; more recent work grapples more seriously with the degree to which specific evolutionary processes of differentiation, selection, and replication shape human society. This careful analytic approach yields more useful insight and avoids the pitfalls of a looser metaphorical approach.

Wang is at his best when he analyzes networks literally. SNA offers powerful tools for understanding how individuals or groups interact, but these tools require analytic precision. Scholars must specify precisely what constitutes vertices and edges in their network models, in the same way they must operationalize variables and units of selection in regression models. Wang's analysis of elite marriage networks demonstrates this level of analytic detail, allowing him to calculate descriptive statistics, compare network changes over time, and draw meaningful inferences.

The analyses suffers somewhat when it lapses into more metaphorical uses of network analysis. For Wang, elite social terrain consists not just of intra-elite relations but of the relations between elites and the groups they represent. Unfortunately, the latter is not easily amenable to quantification; so, the analysis feels more nebulous. To be fair, this is a limitation of the data available and cannot easily be improved upon.

Of greater concern is the loose way Wang names his three network topologies. His use of the terms *star, bowtie,* and *ring network* are at best metaphorical. In network theory, a *bowtie network* involves a cluster of nodes providing one-way input into a central densely networked cluster, which then passes one-way output to a third cluster.[1] In a *ring network*, each node connects to precisely two other nodes, forming a continuous circular pathway. Neither accurately characterizes the elite terrain Wang describes. The improper use of these terms creates ambiguity that future scholars will have to contend with if they wish to extend Wang's research or employ his framework elsewhere.

The book sometimes feels repetitive, and the theory's presentation can feel uneven at times. In the first chapter, Wang briefly presents something he calls "the sovereign's dilemma": the idea that a ruler faces a trade-off between maintaining state strength and maintaining his own rule. He mostly abandons this device after its initial presentation, which is probably for the best; it implies rulers have agency over the design of elite social terrain, which is hard to square

with the reality that elite social terrain emerges from widespread, slow-moving historical and social forces.

Small critiques aside, this is an impressive work of scholarship that deserves shelf space beside classic treatments of European state formation. Wang succeeds in his goal of telling the political story of the Great Divergence, and along the way he develops a compelling new theory that he skillfully supports with evidence. His extraordinary data-collection efforts, impressive use of mixed methods, and novel quantitative work sets a gold standard for what social science today can and should be.

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Notes

1. Tamar Friedlander et al., "Evolution of Bow-Tie Architectures in Biology," *PLOS Computational Biology* 11, no. 3 (2015): e1004055, https://doi.org/.