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Imperial state formation in Rome and China:  
From the Great Convergence to the First Great Divergence

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Walter Scheidel

Stanford University

Abstract: This paper provides a synoptic outline of convergent trends in state formation in western and eastern Eurasia from the mid-first millennium BCE to the mid-first millennium CE and considers the problem of subsequent divergence.

© Walter Scheidel. [scheidel@stanford.edu](mailto:scheidel@stanford.edu)

Why should we compare ancient Rome and China? My choice of these two specimens owes much to their uniquely dominant position in early world history. 2,000 years ago, up to half of the entire human species had come to be contained within just two political systems, the Roman empire and the Han empire at the opposite ends of Eurasia. Both empires were broadly similar in terms of size, with about 60 million people on 4 million km<sup>2</sup> each. Both states were run by god-like emperors residing in the biggest cities the world had seen so far; both states were made up of some 1,500 to 2,000 administrative districts and employed 100,000s of soldiers. Both empires laid claim to ruling the whole world, *orbis terrarum* and *tianxia*, while both encountered the same competition for surplus between central government and local elites, the same pressures generated by secondary state formation beyond the frontiers and subsequent barbarian infiltration, and both of them even ended in similar ways: One half, the original 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 maintained by a traditionalist regime. It was only from the late sixth century CE onwards 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 familiar cluster of modern nation states. This early medieval divergence, in turn, may or may not be meaningfully related to what has become known as the ‘Great Divergence’ between modern economic development in the West and stagnation in the East.<sup>1</sup>

All I can do here is give some glimpses of a more substantial research project that I have labeled the *Stanford Ancient Chinese and Mediterranean Empires Comparative History Project*, a project that seeks to undertake, for the first time ever, a systematic comparative study of state formation in eastern and western Eurasia in antiquity, and to consider its relation to later, modern developments in both areas.<sup>2</sup> This goal will be pursued in a series of conferences, one on ancient Rome and China held last year at Stanford, with a sequel planned for 2007/8.<sup>3</sup> In addition, we have obtained a Mellon grant to focus on what I have proposed to call the ‘First Great Divergence’, between early medieval Europe and China from the Six Dynasties period to the Sui-Tang dynasties, which will result in a year-long seminar series in 2007/8 and a final conference with experts on the ‘(Second) Great Divergence’.<sup>4</sup> We hope

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<sup>1</sup> K. Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy*, Princeton 2000.

<sup>2</sup> [www.stanford.edu/~scheidel/acme.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/~scheidel/acme.htm).

<sup>3</sup> W. Scheidel, M. Lewis and J. Manning, org., ‘Institutions of empire: comparative perspectives on ancient Chinese and Mediterranean history’, Stanford, May 13-14, 2005 (to be published as W. Scheidel, ed., *Rome and China: comparative perspectives on ancient world empires*, New York); W. Scheidel, org., ‘State power and social control in ancient China and Rome’, Stanford, March 2008.

<sup>4</sup> I. Morris, W. Scheidel and M. Lewis, org., ‘The first great divergence: China and Europe, 500-800 CE’, Mellon-Sawyer seminar, Stanford, 2007/8; I. Morris and W. Scheidel, org., ‘The first great divergence: China and Europe, 500-800 CE’, Stanford, Spring 2008.

that these interlinking projects will make a significant contribution in several areas – the methodology of studying early empires, the understanding of different long-term outcomes, and causal links between the distant and much more recent past.

Much of what needs to be known to tackle this complex of problems has yet to be figured out by our collaborators. A much fuller account of what can already be said at this point will be provided in a forthcoming paper.<sup>5</sup> Here, I want to focus on a few key points. One is that different structural preconditions may yield very similar outcomes. In the present case, it can be shown that substantial differences in ecological preconditions and political organization did not affect historical outcomes in terms of state formation. Rather, we observe a prolonged process of gradual convergence that lasted for many centuries but was eventually replaced by a process of increasing divergence that has continued ever since.

In terms of ecological context, both entities shared the most fundamental requirement of being located within the temperate zone of Eurasia that thanks to its climate, flora and fauna is conducive to the development of social complexity and large polities, as demonstrated by Jared Diamond and others.<sup>6</sup> 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 the case of China a loess and river plain core and a hotter and wetter southern periphery. In both cases, the locus of development eventually shifted into these former peripheries. At the same time, however, we encounter substantial differences, most notably the fact that the Roman empire centered on a temperate sea core that is highly conducive to communication, 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 the canal system from the Sui period onwards, posed greater physical obstacles to integration. Moreover, while the main western rivers such as Rhone, Rhine, Danube and Nile radiate outwards from the sea core, Chinese rivers all flow eastwards, reinforcing regional separation. Judging from these preconditions alone, one might think that *ceteris paribus*, the West was more likely to end up united than the East. At the same time, however, China is more compact 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 east-west from the Atlantic into eastern Iran, and has a much more open frontier to the northeast that facilitates movement by agriculturalists and nomads alike. It is striking that while the China core was united for 1,643 of the past 2,207 years, or 75% of the time, the corresponding score for the western ecumene

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<sup>5</sup> W. Scheidel, 'State formation in Rome and China', in W. Scheidel, ed., *Rome and China: comparative perspectives on ancient world empires*, New York (in preparation). For earlier, much briefer comparisons, see G. Lorenz, 'Das Imperium Romanum und das China der Han-Dynastie: Gedanken und Materialien zu einem Vergleich', *Informationen für Geschichtslehrer* 12 (1990), 9-60; R. Motomura, 'An approach towards a comparative study of the Roman empire and the Ch'in and Han empires', *Kodai* 2 (1991), 61-9; S. A. M. Adsehead, *China in world history*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Basingstoke 2000, 4-21, 64-71, and *T'ang China: the rise of the East in world history*, Basingstoke 2004, 20-9; M. Dettenhofer, 'Das römische Imperium und das China der Han-Zeit: Ansätze zu einer historischen Komparatistik', *Latomus* 65 (2006, in press). Cf. also the recent conference organized by F.-H. Mutschler and A. Mittag, 'Conceiving the "empire": ancient China and Rome – an intercultural comparison in dialogue', Essen (Germany), April 20-23, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> J. Diamond, *Guns, germs, and steel: the fates of human societies*, new ed. New York 2005.

is exactly zero.<sup>7</sup> Only the Umayyad empire ever managed to stretch from the Atlantic to the Indus, and that only for 40 years. I mention these countervailing factors as a reminder of how difficult it is to relate physical environment to state formation.

In both cases, these 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 Yangzi 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 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 spread of Greek settlements across the Mediterranean littoral and the cultural Hellenization of autonomous local elites.

In an article published in 1994 that has been completely ignored, Christian Gizewski proposed a useful nine-phase parallel model of the development of the Qin-Han and the Roman states which, somewhat modified, I will briefly paraphrase here to show the striking extent of convergence at the most basic level of state formation.<sup>8</sup> The first stage (down to about 500 BCE) brought 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 political system, i.e. Eastern Zhou, Rome was autonomous and embedded only in regional city state clusters (Latins and Etruscans), thanks to its geographical distance from the great powers of the Levant.

The second stage in the 5<sup>th</sup> and into the 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE witnessed growth to an autonomous middling power and conflict with equivalent competitors: within central Italy in the case of Rome, and in the 'land within the passes' (*Guanzhong*) in the case of Qin. Both polities retained their autonomy 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 great powers.

The third phase resulted in hegemonic power over a large sector of the ecumene in the 4<sup>th</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE, all over Italy in Rome and expansion into Sichuan in the case of Qin. Once again, these expansions proceeded without triggering conflict with the major powers of the koine but already entailed incipient encroachment, on the Greeks in Italy and on 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. In both cases, the state emerged much strengthened from these processes. The main difference is that due to differences in political organization, Roman expansion strengthened its aristocratic collective

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<sup>7</sup> If we apply the more stringent standards introduced by V. Tin-bor Hui, *War and state formation in ancient China and early modern Europe*, Cambridge 2005, 257-8, who defines periods of Chinese unification 'by the establishment or restoration of the Qin Dynasty's maximal territorial reach' (257 n.4), China has experienced 777 years of unity since 220 CE, once again compared to none in the territory formerly covered by the Roman empire at its peak.

<sup>8</sup> C. Gizewski, 'Römische und alte chinesische Geschichte im Vergleich: Zur Möglichkeit eines gemeinsamen Altertumsbegriffs', *Klio* 76 (1994), 271-302, here revised according to Scheidel (n.5).

leadership whereas success in Qin strengthened the monarchy through its growing administrative-coercive apparatus.

Fourth, the ascent to hegemony over the entire core ecumene in a series of high-stakes wars in the 3<sup>rd</sup> through 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE in Rome and in a more compressed format in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE in China. In both cases, hegemony preceded direct rule, although the proto-bureaucratization of Qin facilitated more rapid annexation than the much more limited administrative capabilities of the oligarchic regime in Rome. In both cases, success triggered violent adjustment processes: in the East, a shift from the highly centralized ‘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; because of the scale of this latter shift, conflict was more sustained, but in both cases the result was the same – a monarchy with, at least first, strong aristocratic participation.

The fifth stage, in the first two centuries CE in Rome and from the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE to the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE in Han, was characterized by slowing expansion and internal homogenization. In both cases, we witness the strengthening of powerful local elites that 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 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, a crisis that was more readily contained by the professional war machine of the Roman empire than by the warlords of Three Kingdoms China. The main difference is that while Chinese fragmentation was largely driven by the interests of the gentry, in Rome it occurred in response to foreign pressure.

The seventh phase of attempted restoration was much more prolonged in Rome than in Jin China but in both cases ended in barbarian conquest, from the early 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE in northern China and from the early 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE 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 underwent some assimilation with local elites, and in both cases transcendent religions that claimed autonomy from the state – Christianity and Buddhism – made considerable progress. Attempts at reunification were more successful in the East under the Sui and Tang dynasties around 600 CE but somewhat less so in the Mediterranean in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

However, it was only afterwards, in phase 9, that developments finally diverged sharply, between the Tang consolidation in the East and the near-destruction of East Rome 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.

In short, we are dealing with what might be called a ‘Great Convergence’ that lasted about 1,500 years, from the early first millennium BCE into the 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE, and which was at least as long as the subsequent period of divergence that continues into the present, of about 1,400 years and counting. This alone shows how important it is to study both systems

comparatively, as both processes, convergence and divergence alike, are, shall we say, very 'hefty' in world historical terms.

As I already mentioned, convergence in state formation was not impeded by substantial differences in regime type and state organization. The most obvious difference is between the increasing centralization of the Warring States period, most intensely in 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE Qin with the reforms associated with Shang Yang, which arguably put Qin ahead of anything that European states accomplished prior to the modern period.<sup>9</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> c. and 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE, the state of Qin went the farthest by breaking the power of hereditary nobles, re-organizing its entire territory into 31 uniform conscription districts (*xian*), creating a pathway grid across the country, ranking the entire population in 18 grades and dividing it into groups of 5 and 10 for collective surveillance and liability, instituting rewards for military prowess, imposing codified penal law, and standardizing currency, weights and measures. These reforms created a homogeneous territorial state, extended state control across all levels 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 enabled Qin to mobilize and deploy military and corvée work forces numbering in the 100,000s. One of my collaborators, the Chicago sociologist Dingxin Zhao, has argued 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.<sup>10</sup> When the state of Qin absorbed its six rivals in the 230s and 220s BCE, the regime of the First Emperor attempted to impose and perpetuate this system across China. This triggered resistance that overthrew the Qin regime and led to a re-assertion of regional forces that underwrote the establishment of the Han monarchy. It took the new dynasty about a century to suppress regional and aristocratic autonomy, a process that was aided by conflict with the Xiongnu, in keeping with the principle that war-making precipitates state-making. After the temporary collapse of the Han dynasty during the Wang Mang usurpation in the early 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE and ensuing civil war, the clock was once again set back 200 years, restoring much power to regional cliques and magnates, and necessitating another and altogether less successful round of state-strengthening reforms. In the end, the growing power of provincial gentry and commanders-turned-warlords conspired to undermine and finally eliminate the central government in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE.<sup>11</sup>

In the last three centuries BCE, Rome accomplished conquests on the same scale as Qin but without comparable intensification of government. In both cases, however, successful expansion was made possible by mass conscription of peasants. In the 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, 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

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<sup>9</sup> Li Yu-ning, ed., *Shang Yang's reforms and state control in China*, White Plains 1977; M. E. Lewis, *Sanctioned violence in early China*, Albany 1990, 54-67; E. Kiser and Y. Cai, 'War and bureaucratization in Qin China: exploring an anomalous case', *American Sociological Review* 68 (2003), 511-39. For comparisons with Europe, cf. Hui (n.7).

<sup>10</sup> D. Zhao, 'The rise of the Qin empire and patterns of Chinese history', unpubl. manuscript Chicago 2005.

<sup>11</sup> See chapters 1-5 in D. Twitchett and M. Loewe, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, I, Cambridge 1986, and M. Lewis's forthcoming book on the Qin-Han empire.

reforms in the same period, albeit usually in a more muted fashion: the introduction of direct taxation to fund war-making; 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 35 conscription districts (*tribus*), functionally equivalent to the 31 *xian* of Qin; land grants to soldiers drawing on annexed territories; and political reform to accommodate social mobility at the elite level.<sup>12</sup> After 295 BCE, and unlike Qin, 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 asymmetrical warfare (against states that relied more on mercenaries in the eastern and southern Mediterranean and against less complex polities in the northern and western periphery) enabled Rome to succeed with less domestic re-structuring than was required in the intensely competitive environment of Warring States China.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, bureaucratization was 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 on the use of their own friends, clients, slaves and freedmen to fulfill administrative tasks.<sup>14</sup> Tightly regulated popular participation provided a benign arbitration device that in other states would have been provided by a weak monarch. Financial management, which required a greater concentration of human capital, was 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,<sup>15</sup> 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 almost always successfully contained and for long periods even marginalized by

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<sup>12</sup> E.g., T. J. Cornell, *The beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c.1000-264 BC)*, London 1995, chapters 12-15, as well as the reforms conventionally ascribed to 'Servius Tullius' discussed in chapter 7.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., G. G. Aperghis, *The Seleukid royal economy: the finances and financial administration of the Seleukid empire*, Cambridge 2004, 189-205; A. Chaniotis, *War in the Hellenistic world*, Malden 2005. In the second century BCE, the bulk of Roman military manpower was directed against 'barbarians': P. A. Brunt, *Italian manpower 225 B.C.–A.D. 14*, Oxford 1971, 422-34; and for much of the first century BCE, war against other Romans or Italians required the largest commitments: *ibid.* 435-512.

<sup>14</sup> R. Schulz, *Herrschaft und Regierung: Roms Regiment in den Provinzen in der Zeit der Republik*, Paderborn 1997, and P. Eich, *Zur Metamorphose des politischen Systems in der römischen Kaiserzeit: Die Entstehung einer "personalen Bürokratie" im langen dritten Jahrhundert*, Berlin 2005, 48-66 are the best analytical accounts.

<sup>15</sup> For the concept, see M. Mann, *The sources of social power, I: a history of power from the beginning to A.D. 1760*, Cambridge 1986, 22-32. Cf. now chapters 6-9 in J. A. Hall and R. Schroeder, eds., *An anatomy of power: the social theory of Michael Mann*, Cambridge 2006.

political-ideological power. The near-perfect fusion of political and ideological power was a function of the centralizing reforms of the Warring States period and the adoption of a hybrid Confucian-Legalist belief system that reinforced state authority.<sup>16</sup> Except in the early city-state phase of the Roman state, 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 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE onwards.

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. 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 largely 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 BCE in China and in the late 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE in Rome.

It is the mature Roman empire of the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE that most resembles the Han empire in institutional terms.<sup>17</sup> 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 emperor became increasingly sequestered. Even child emperors managed by powerful regents, who had long been common in China but unknown in Rome, eventually appeared in the later Roman empire.

In the final analysis, all the major differences in political and administrative organization between Rome and China can be explained in terms of the initial difference in regime type: in the case of Rome, collective aristocratic rule accounts for an early reluctance to annex, the lack of bureaucracy not just during the Republic but also for the first three centuries of the monarchy, and the continuing use of aristocrats as delegates of the ruler and his military commanders for the same 300-year period. In China, by contrast, centralization, the creation of territorial states and the disempowerment of aristocrats favored rapid annexation and bureaucratic expansion. But this is not to say that oligarchic traditions continued to constrain Roman state formation indefinitely. As soon as an impetus for reform was provided by the military crisis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, Roman state institutions rapidly converged with those of the Han state: a strong numerical expansion of the bureaucracy, homogenization of registration

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<sup>16</sup> E.g., Zhao (n.10), for legalism see Z. Fu, *China’s legalists: the earliest totalitarians and their art of ruling*, Armonk 1996; on the legalist permeation of Han-period state Confucianism, see now Lewis (n.11).

<sup>17</sup> Compare H. Bielenstein, *The bureaucracy of Han times*, Cambridge 1980 and chapters 7-8 in Twitchett and Loewe (n.11) with A. Demandt, *Die Spätantike*, Munich 1989, 211-72 or C. Kelly, *Ruling the later Roman empire*, Cambridge MA 2004.



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.<sup>18</sup>

The common notion that 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 each. Second, even before the reforms in late antiquity did Roman governors draw on the services of 1,000s of seconded soldiers as well as their own slaves and freedmen while the *familia Caesaris*, the patrimonial staff of the emperors, must have contained 1,000s of slaves and ex-slaves. By 400 CE, the Roman state employed over 30,000 civilian officials, compared to probably fewer than 100,000 in Eastern Han China.<sup>19</sup> 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. Moreover, differences at the city level are also minimal: it is true that Roman cities looked very different because of their monumentalism, and it is true that Han cities did not feature self-governing city councils or elections. However, each of 1,577 counties (*xian*) of the late Western Han period had only a single top official (*ling*) who was sent in from outside by the central government: everybody else may have had fancy government titles and stipends but were recruited locally, just as urban magistrates were in the Roman empire.<sup>20</sup> In both cases, these local elites handled census registration, tax collection, local jurisdiction, public works, policing, and so forth. (And even many Roman cities were eventually assigned an external *curator rei publicae*, and later a *defensor civitatis*, reducing differences even further.<sup>21</sup>) The meritocratic element of Chinese bureaucracy also tends to get exaggerated: most Han officials obtained office via recommendation by their seniors, i.e. through straightforward patronage, just as in Rome; others bought offices, as in the later Roman empire. In quantitative terms, Han entry examinations were a fringe phenomenon, producing only a few hundred candidates each year, and even in Rome, where formal credentialing remained unknown, senior officials were increasingly expected to have studied law.<sup>22</sup> In all respects, after the third century CE, convergence had greatly diminished any institutional differences between the two empires.

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 miserably. It is true that in Rome, military power had long been more autonomous than in China; but by the late

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<sup>18</sup> See now esp. Eich (n.14), 338-90.

<sup>19</sup> Kelly (n.17), 111 and 268 n.9; M. Loewe, 'The structure and practice of government', in Twitchett and Loewe (n.11), 466 (120,285 officials at the end of the Western Han period, before the number of *xian* was cut by 25% at the beginning of the Eastern Han dynasty, with consequent staffing reductions).

<sup>20</sup> Bielenstein (n.17), 99-104; Mark Lewis, pers. comm. Roman cities relied more on public slaves than on salaried officials: A. Weiß, *Sklave der Stadt: Untersuchungen zur öffentlichen Sklaverei in den Städten des Römischen Reiches*, Stuttgart 2004.

<sup>21</sup> W. Langhammer, *Die rechtliche und soziale Stellung der Magistratus municipales und der Decuriones in der Übergangsphase der Städte von sich selbstverwaltenden Gemeinden zu Vollzugsorganen des spätantiken Zwangsstaates (2.-4. Jahrhundert der römischen Kaiserzeit)*, Wiesbaden 1973, 165-75.

<sup>22</sup> Bielenstein (n.17), 132-42; F. M. Ausbüttel, *Die Verwaltung des römischen Kaiserreiches*, Darmstadt 1998, 178-9.

2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE China was catching up nicely, and began to suffer the same problems that Rome traditionally suffered at the hands of military pretenders and usurpers. In both cases, moreover, we observe infiltration by barbarian settlers, Xiongnu, Xianbei and Wuhuan in China, Goths, Burgundians and others in the West, who nominally accepted imperial rule but increasingly exercised political autonomy.<sup>23</sup> 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 barbarians 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, over time, we witness a synthesis of foreign and local elites.<sup>24</sup>

So how can we explain the vastly different outcomes after the end of antiquity? I have no obvious answer to this question. All kinds of factors may have played a role. For one, the larger size of the western ecumene was a priori more conducive to fragmentation: China lacked state-level competitors of the caliber of the Persians and Arabs. Increased rainfall from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE may have benefited northern China more than Europe. The Chinese successor states were better at containing movement in the steppe, whereas Europe was exposed to Avars, Slavs, Bulgarians, Magyars, and Vikings. China was spared the 200 years of recurrent plague that ravaged the early medieval West. It is perhaps unsurprising that the Umayyads, from the beginning hamstrung by the tribal quasi-autonomy of their regional armies, failed to follow in the footsteps of the mature Roman state and were unable to hold their state together long enough to complete ecumenical conquest, let alone maintain a universal empire.<sup>25</sup> It is easy to give a long list of overtly plausible factors but difficult to weigh their relative importance.

Finally, to focus more specifically on the demise of empire in western Europe, we need to compare the barbarian successor state that reunited China, Northern Wei and Northern Zhou, with their western counterparts, the Frankish state or states. The latter first lost their ability to levy tax on yield or people, and later, even worse, their ability to control local lords. Surplus extraction and coercive action came to be managed by the same local and regional powerholders, eroding the capabilities of central government.<sup>26</sup> In northern China, by contrast, the victorious conquest elites never appear to have lost their ability to register and tax, to seize surplus from local big men who ran thousands of fortified communities, or to mobilize huge forces of native Chinese at least for military support functions; and eventually they even embarked on intensifying 'sinicizing' reforms that simply lacked an equivalent in the early medieval West, including the allocation of farm land to individual peasant

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<sup>23</sup> R. de Crespigny, *Northern frontier: the policies and strategy of the Later Han empire*, Canberra 1984; H. Wolfram, *The Roman empire and its Germanic peoples*, Berkeley 1997; P. Heather, *The fall of the Roman empire: a new history of Rome and the barbarians*, Oxford 2006; W. Goffart, *Barbarian tides: the migration age and the Later Roman empire*, Philadelphia 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Most concisely, C. Wickham, 'Society', in R. McKitterick, ed., *The early Middle Ages*, Oxford 2001, 59-94; D. A. Graff, *Medieval Chinese warfare, 300-900*, London 2002, chapters 3 and 5.

<sup>25</sup> H. Kennedy, *The armies of the caliphs: military and society in the early Islamic state*, London 2001, chapters 1-3.

<sup>26</sup> Wickham (n.24) and *Framing the early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800*, Oxford 2005.

households, a crucial basis for proper taxation, bureaucracy and centralization.<sup>27</sup> They also regained a tight grip on Buddhism, which had temporarily flourished into autonomy and privilege in ways not entirely different from western Christianity, and re-asserted the ideological supremacy of Confucianism, with its helpful fusion of political and ideological power.<sup>28</sup> Why China never completely lost its bureaucratic tradition that underpinned the central state, or maintained a strong desire for re-unification, may be a key issue here. The most important question is to what extent this outcome was contingent, in the sense of how likely was it that things could have gone differently, resulting perhaps in feudalization and long-term fragmentation across China, something that had in fact already happened once, in the early Spring and Autumn period in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. A question like this requires the application of counterfactual reasoning: in a first step, I have developed a set of six counterfactual outcomes for the Roman empire that assesses both the likelihood of its premature demise or of its survival or successful restoration.<sup>29</sup> Once again, there is no time to go into this, but a similar approach is also necessary in the case of China.

An even bigger question, of course, is whether any of this actually matters in terms of later development: was modernity somehow causally related to the fact that China was a single state and the West was not?

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<sup>27</sup> R. Huang, *China: a macro history*, Armonk 1997, chapter 9; Graff (n.24) chapters 3 and 5.

<sup>28</sup> P. Demiéville, 'Philosophy and religion from Han to Sui', in Twitchett and Loewe (n.11), 808-72, esp. 846-72.

<sup>29</sup> W. Scheidel, *Explaining empire: models for ancient history*, in preparation ([www.stanford.edu/~scheidel/EE.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/~scheidel/EE.pdf)).