

# Comments on Shuo and Ma

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1 Overview

2 Theory

3 Empirics

4 Whither Tilly

5 Innovation and growth

# Question and Answer

**How to explain China's "unparalleled" political unity over time?**

- External war + Direct rule + Ideology + Geography

# Attributes

- Sweeping scope of analysis (2000+ years)
- Innovative data
- Thought-provoking

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# Theory is not super clear

- Has to do with: External war + Direct rule + Ideology + Geography
- Conflates inputs and outputs
- Devote separate section to mapping out argument
- My attempt follows

## Theoretical background: Charles Tilly (1975, 1992)

- “War makes states. . .”
- Interstate competition
- $\Rightarrow \text{Pr}(\text{External War}) \uparrow$
- $\Rightarrow$  State's tax capacity  $\uparrow$  to effectively wage war
- $\Rightarrow$  State bureaucracy  $\uparrow$  to collect tax revenue
- Tilly's logic also has implications for political development, to discuss ahead

# Theory, recast

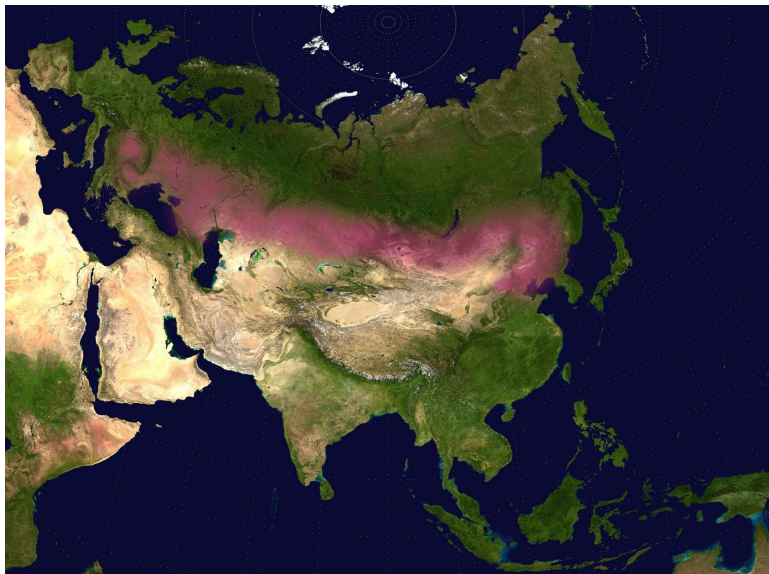
- Starting point: Warring states period (770-221 BCE)
- This takes place within agrarian plain in northern China
- ⇒ Relatively centralized, coercive bureaucratic state a la Tilly within agrarian northern China plain by 221 BCE under Qin dynasty
- Both direct rule and ideology (legitimizing single ruler) are established in consequence



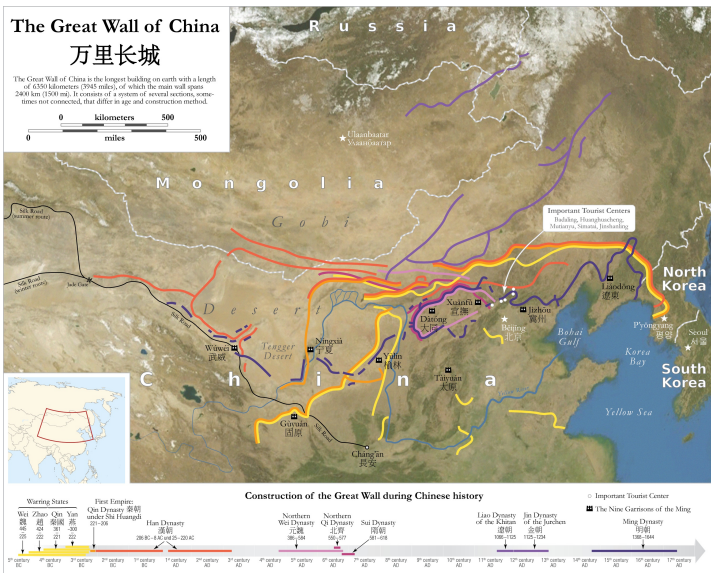
# Enter geography

- Geography induces nomadic-agrarian divide to north of agrarian northern China plain
  - Agrarian zone receives 400 cm avg rainfall, but nomadic zone receives little
- ⇒ Recurrent conflict dynamic in which nomads raid to enjoy spoils of centralized agrarian regime from Qin onward
- Both direct rule and ideology are reinforced in consequence
- Over time, war-direct rule-ideology-geography nexus becomes self-sustaining
  - Great Wall is outcome of this nexus (e.g. under Qin, Ming)
- In the paper, this overall logic is yet unclear

# Great Steppe in red



## Great Wall



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# Empirical analysis is incomplete

- Clearer logic implies additional empirical tests
- You show us econometric evidence that nomadic-agrarian conflict predicts state/territorial consolidation
- Yet other implications of your argument are still not fully tested
- For example: Why not show us econometric evidence for the relationship between nomadic-agrarian conflict and ideology, e.g. in terms of usage of “unity” (tong) and “Han” (vs “barbarian”)?
- Similarly: Why not show us econometric evidence for the relationship between nomadic-agrarian conflict and Great Wall construction?
- Also, the link between war and direct rule could be empirically strengthened, e.g. by evaluating the time series relationship between agrarian-nomadic conflict and the number of imperial bureaucrats stationed in peripheral regions

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# Fragmented Europe

- Turn back to Tilly, now with a focus on political implications
- Standard account of ‘war makes states. . .’ is about fragmented Europe
- Fall of Carolingian Empire (9th century)
- ⇒ No centralized bureaucratic structures
- ⇒ Geopolitical fragmentation ↑
- ⇒ Interstate competition ↑
- ⇒ Pr(External War) ↑
- ⇒ Ruler must obtain new revenue to wage war
- ⇒ Willing to exchange political freedoms (communes, parliaments)
- By surrendering (partial) political control, ruler secures new funds
- And elite taxpayers gain formal public policy (spending) roles

# Adapt to centralized China

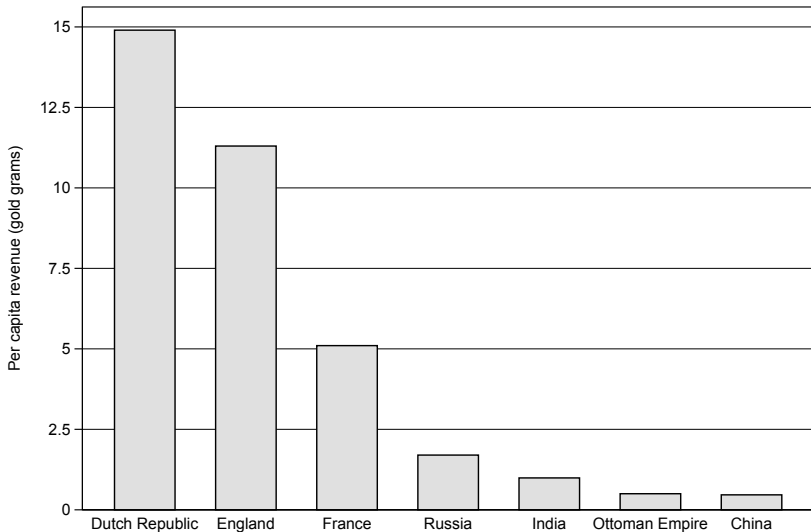
- Different starting point:
- Relatively centralized, coercive bureaucratic state from Qin onward
- ⇒ No need for ruler to exchange political freedoms for new revenue
- Can rely on incumbent tax bureaucracy instead
- This aspect is a twist on Tilly
- Nomadic-agrarian war still makes states, but by doubling down on state's coercive capacity
- “Autocratic re-entrenchment” (Dincecco-Wang 2018)
- This logic can be made clearer in the paper



# Fiscal implication

- “No taxation without representation”
- States in Western Europe gather much higher revenue per capita than in imperial China circa 1780s
- Implication: High bureaucratic coercion may have undercut emperor's ability to raise revenue, due to lack of public policy (spending) roles by elite taxpayers

# Per capita revenue across Eurasia in the 1780s



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# Open questions

- Shuo and Ma conclude: *With China's re-emergence as the world's second largest economy after four decades of rapid economic growth, can the ideology of a single ruler under Confucian-legalist synthesis endure?*
- Long history of autocratic re-entrenchment suggests endurance is probable
- Economic modernization driving democratic reform a la Lipset is unlikely
- ⇒ Another open question: *Will autocratic re-entrenchment in China stymie future growth prospects?*
- In Europe, political bargain a la Tilly (i.e. due in part to military pressures) has strengthened individual rights vis-a-vis the state
- This has helped underpin incentives to innovate and thus the propensity for technological change and growth
- In China, no such political bargain, suggesting lower growth prospects
- However, AI may permit new interactions between innovation and autocracy; see e.g. Beraja et al 2023