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A Dynamic Theory of World Politics

This book originates from a peculiar puzzle: Why is it that political scientists and Europeanists take for granted checks and balances in European politics, while Chinese and sinologists take for granted a coercive universal empire in China? This research question is not as odd as it appears because China in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (656–221 BC) was a multistate system that closely resembled Europe in the early modern period (AD 1495–1815). Although it is often presumed that China or Zhongguo refers to the "Middle Kingdom," this term originally referred to "central states": *zhong* means "central" and *guo* means "states."[1] As the early modern European system did, the Zhongguo system experienced disintegration of feudal hierarchy, prevalence of war, conditions of international anarchy, emergence of sovereign territorial states, configuration of the balance of power, development of the centralized bureaucracy, birth of state-society bargains, expansion of international trade, and other familiar phenomena of international and domestic politics. If the balance of power prevailed in international politics and the constitutional state triumphed in state-society relations in Europe, then why did the opposite outcomes occur in ancient China? Is it because China was destined to have authoritarian rule under a unified empire as taught in standard Chinese history books? Alternatively, is it possible that the European trajectory was far more contingent than is presumed by the Eurocentric perspective?

To understand two historical trajectories as what they are, I have been driven to work out a dynamic theory of world politics that blends Eurocentric and Sinocentric perspectives, connects the ancient and the

[1] Chen 1941, 643; Loewe 1999, 993–994; Ye 1992, 89–135.

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modern, reconciles alternative trajectories and opposite outcomes, and incorporates persistent continuity and endogenous transformation. To achieve these goals, the proposed theory examines the mutual constitution of international competition and state formation, the simultaneity of competing causal mechanisms, the strategic interaction of actors, the conjuncture of motivation and capability, the interaction of agency and structure, and the coexistence of institutional stasis and innovations. Scholars of international politics and state-society relations generally presume that attempts at domination are necessarily checked by countervailing mechanisms. This mainstream perspective is not inaccurate, but it is one-sided. A dynamic theory should examine coercive mechanisms and strategies which *facilitate* domination as well as countervailing mechanisms and strategies which *check* attempts at domination. A dynamic theory should also view politics – both international and domestic – as processes of strategic interaction between domination-seekers and targets of domination who employ competing strategies and who are simultaneously facilitated and burdened by competing causal mechanisms. As strategic interactions generate multiple equilibria, it is then possible to see how strategies and mechanisms are transcendent across time and space while outcomes are sensitive to historically contingent conditions. By accounting for both similarity in processes and divergence in outcomes, this dynamic framework also highlights in what ways Chinese history could have followed the European pattern and at what moments European history could have followed the Chinese pattern.

Given the unusual comparison of China and Europe, I introduce the unfamiliar ancient Chinese system in the first section and discuss the "uncommon foundations" method in the second section. The building blocks of a dynamic theory are outlined in the third section. Although the proposed theory is meant to integrate the dynamics of international politics and the dynamics of state formation, the two spheres are discussed separately in the fourth and fifth sections. The initial and environmental conditions that shape the competition of opposite mechanisms and strategies are addressed in the sixth section, and some common "alternative explanations" are clarified in the last.

1.1 Cases

Chang Kwang-chih suggested two decades ago that

> [i]t is time to consider the possibility that theories of history could be built on the development of other civilizations. . . . Chinese history is as formidable and massive

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as Western history, but it has not been analyzed in the same way. . . . Chinese records will make an important contribution to historical theory: they will confirm it through substantial data, or they will modify it to some degree, resulting in generalizations of ever wider applicability and validity.[2]

In the same spirit, Kenneth Waltz recommends that scholars "look farther afield . . . to the China of the [W]arring [S]tates era . . . and see that where political entities of whatever sort compete freely, substantive and stylistic characteristics are similar."[3] Indeed, of all historical systems in world history, the ancient Chinese system most closely resembles the stereotypical anarchical international system because it is composed of sovereign territorial states while other systems are constituted by nonstate entities (such as city-states) or dissimilar units (that is, the coexistence of territorial states, city-states, city-leagues, city-empires). Not surprisingly, the few scholars who have accepted the challenge to compare China and Europe have produced very interesting findings.[4] Richard Walker has identified many "obvious" and "unbelievably precise" parallels between ancient China and modern Europe.[5] Bin Wong discovers that many "[i]deas and institutions that are specifically 'modern' in the West are simply not 'modern' in China."[6]

Similarly to the early modern European system, the ancient Chinese system emerged from the ruins of the prior feudal order. Zhou established a feudal hierarchy after conquering Shang around 1045 BC.[7] The Zhou king directly ruled vast areas that he could effectively control. At the same time, the king enfeoffed his sons, relatives, and high officials (who had made significant contributions in the takeover) to defend distant strategic points from the conquered Shang people and their former allies.[8] Each

[2] Chang 1983, 128–129. Following the Chinese convention, Chinese names begin with surnames unless the scholars in question go by English names.

[3] Waltz 1986, 329–330. Among political scientists, scholars of international relations who aspire to universal theories across time and space are the most sympathetic to a comparison with ancient China. A number of them have introduced the ancient Chinese system to students of international relations (IR). See Bau 1986; Chan 1999; Chen 1941; Holsti 1995, 34–49; 1999, 284–286; Johnston 1995; Walker 1953. Other IR scholars have also alluded to the ancient Chinese system. See Cusack and Stoll 1990, 5–8, 16; Jervis 1997, 133; Levy 1983, 10; van Evera 1998, 36–37; 1999, 179–182.

[4] However, it is important for adventuresome social scientists to learn from historians of China. Otherwise, scholars may well produce misleading accounts.

[5] Walker 1953, xi. [6] Wong 1997, 101.

[7] There is no agreement on when the Zhou era began. I adopt Sawyer's dating. Sawyer 1993, 380, fn. 10. Some historians use 1122 BC. Dating of any events before 841 BC can only be based on rough estimates.

[8] Zhou feudalism is called *fengjian*. This term literally means to "enfeof [nobles] and construct [the state]." Hook 1991, 169.

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enfeoffed lord would move to the designated area with his whole lineage and build a garrisoned city-state called *guo*. In the beginning, the Zhou king's authority was buttressed by both his position as the head of an extended lineage and his control over far superior economic resources and military strength. Over time, however, blood ties between the Zhou king and feudal lords became distant. At the same time, the balance of capabilities gradually shifted in favor of *guo* because the centrally located Zhou court had little room for expansion while feudal units could expand into uncharted surrounding areas.

The Zhou hierarchy eventually crumbled in 770 BC, when a disastrous "barbarian"[9] attack forced the Zhou court to move eastward from Hao to Loyang. This incident "marked the definitive end of the political and military dominance of the royal house."[10] The court's resource base was dramatically reduced after losing Hao to "barbarians" and granting additional lands to various powerful *guo* as rewards for their assistance during the crisis. In the subsequent Spring and Autumn period (770–453 BC) and Warring States period (453–221 BC),[11] *guo* were independent of the Zhou court. As an assertion of this new reality, the Lu *guo* began to keep its own court chronicle, the *Chunqiu* or *Spring and Autumn Annals*, in 722 BC. The Zheng *guo*, which bordered Zhou, even repeatedly seized harvests from the royal domain. To "punish" Zheng, Zhou declared war in 707 BC but suffered a humiliating defeat. Henceforth, Zhou sank further to "the level of her formal vassals."[12] In diplomatic meetings, all heads of *guo* treated one another as equals despite their differences in feudal ranks.

Historians of ancient China typically date the beginning of the multistate era in 770 BC. However, the disintegration of feudal hierarchy is not the only criterion for dating the onset of system formation.[13] Jack Levy

[9] Descendants of the Zhou lineage generally viewed non-Zhou peoples as "barbarians," even though the latter could be just as civilized as the former.

[10] Lewis 1990, 47. The Zhou era before the move is thus called "Western Zhou" and the era afterward "Eastern Zhou." But some historians object to the term "Eastern Zhou" as it carries the problematic implication that the Zhou court still exercised authority over *guo*. While the court most likely maintained some moral and ceremonial authority, effective authority was a different matter.

[11] The Spring and Autumn period was named after the Lu chronicle *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals). The Warring States period was named after *Zhanguo ce* (Stratagems of the Warring States), which was written in the Han Dynasty. Historians have no agreement on the year that divides the two periods. I use 453 BC, when Jin was split into Han, Wei, and Zhao.

[12] Hsu 1965a, 5. Zhou was eventually exterminated by Qin in 256 BC.

[13] Borrowing from the state formation literature, I use the term "system formation" to refer to the formation of an international system.

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argues that an international system is composed of "states characterized by the centralization of political power within a given territory, independent from any higher secular authority and interacting in an interdependent system of security relations."[14] Barry Buzan and Richard Little highlight the third element, arguing that "a set of states that cannot pose each other military threat fail to constitute an international system."[15] The ability of states to form interdependent relations is a function of "interaction capacity," that is, "the amount of transportation, communication, and organizational capability" in a system.[16] Levy suggests that "the French invasion of Italy at the end of 1494 and the Treaty of Venice in March of 1495 mark the coalescence of the major European states into a truly interdependent system of behavior" in Europe.[17] In ancient China, military and diplomatic contacts remained bilateral and regional rather than systemic in scope for a century after 770 BC. Bruce Brooks observes from Lu's *Spring and Autumn Annals* that it was not until around 659 BC that *guo* developed sufficient contacts to acquire systemwide mutual awareness.[18] Coincidentally, Chu repeatedly attacked Zheng from 659 to 653 BC and Qi responded by mobilizing a northern alliance, which invaded Chu's territory in 656 BC. I thus date the onset of the ancient Chinese system in 656 BC. The ancient Chinese system ended at the establishment of a universal empire in 221 BC, whereas the early modern European system ended at the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815.[19]

In the multistate era, *guo* waged wars against one another, made and broke alliances as they saw fit, and set up diplomatic offices to handle matters of war and peace. In this environment, ancient China developed the art of war and the markers of territorial sovereignty light years before Western practices.[20] The *zhongguo* or central states in ancient China

[14] Levy 1983, 21. [15] Buzan and Little 2000, 80. [16] Ibid.

[17] Levy 1983, 21. Some scholars of international relations date the onset of the modern European system in 1648. See Philpott 2001; Gross 1968. However, as Gross points out, "The Peace of Westphalia did no more than legalize a condition of things already in existence." Gross 1968, 60; also Krasner 1999. Moreover, historians tend to use either the French invasion of Italy or the convenient century marker of 1500.

[18] I thank Bruce Brooks for this crucial point. Personal communication, June 2 and November 7, 2002.

[19] From then on, many modern phenomena such as the industrial revolution, laissez-faire capitalism, and liberal democracy would make the comparison with ancient China more problematic. But I will discuss the post-1815 world in Chapter Five, Conclusion and Implications.

[20] Ancient Chinese diplomacy was mission-based. Thus, it may be said that diplomacy was not as developed in ancient China as in Renaissance Italy. However, at the onset of the early modern period, diplomacy in the rest of Europe was also less institutionalized than

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were similar to European states: they were territorial in that they defined their rule as "exclusive authority over a fixed territorial space" and were sovereign in that they "claim[ed] final authority and recognize[d] no higher source of jurisdiction."[21] Although *guo* were originally city-states sparsely located throughout the Yellow River valley, they became larger and larger territorial units as the more powerful pacified surrounding areas and conquered weaker neighbors. In the Spring and Autumn period, buffer zones were gradually taken over and noncontiguous pieces of territory were sometimes peacefully exchanged. With more continuous territory, boundaries became increasingly hardened with checkpoints established along borders. Envoys who wished to cross a third state to their destinations had to seek permission or risk seizure and death. In the Warring States period, the territorial aspect of sovereign states was increasingly "marked by the building of chains of watch stations and forts at strategic points, and ultimately the creation of large defensive walls along the boundaries of the various states."[22] In the late multistate era, travelers were even required to carry identification documents or what we in the modern era call "passports."[23]

Ancient China resembled early modern Europe not just in interstate relations, but also in state-society relations. The sovereign territorial states in ancient China developed centralized authority with bureaucratized administration, monopolized coercion, and nationalized taxation. It is often presumed that the centralized bureaucracy is modern and Western. However, Herrlee Creel highlights that "[t]he most surprising and perhaps the most illuminating similarities appear when comparison is made between China's government as it existed two thousand years ago and the highly centralized bureaucratic administration of modern states."[24] The distinction of the state from the reigning ruler, the separation of public offices from officeholders, the selection and promotion of officials on the basis of objective and meritocratic criteria, the universality and impartiality of publicly promulgated laws, the registration and enumeration

in Italy. Moreover, in ancient China, there were such recurrent occasions to arrange alliances, declare war, or make peace that there were almost constant diplomatic exchanges between the *guo*.

[21] Spruyt 1994, 34. [22] Lewis 1999, 629.

[23] Such documents were inscribed on bronze, wood, or other materials and were designed to give official permission to let the bearer through government checkpoints. Yates 1980, 26.

[24] Creel 1970a, 3; see also 1970b, 124. Creel refers to the early Han Dynasty. But the administrative technologies listed here were developed in the Warring States period and then adopted by the Qin and Han Dynasties.

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of populations, the central budgeting of revenues and expenditures, the amassing of statistics and reports, the capacity for direct rule, and other administrative techniques were developed in China two thousand years ahead of Europe. Moreover, as I shall elaborate later, state-society bargains in terms of legal rights, enlightened thoughts, and welfare policies indigenously emerged on Chinese soil long before they blossomed on European soil. In short, ancient China shared striking similarities with early modern Europe in many crucial respects.

Before I proceed further, I should underscore that this book does not provide a complete account of interstate and state-society relations in two historical systems which together span 757 years. No single analysis can do such a daunting task. As Charles Tilly says about his macrohistory of the second millennium, "I must deal with historical facts like a rock skipping water . . . I do not know all the history one would need to write this book fully."[25] Nor do I know enough about the ancient Middle East, classical Greece, pre-Mauryan India, classical Maya, Renaissance Italy, Samguk Korea, and Tokugawa Japan to claim that this China-Europe comparison is generalizable to other historical systems.[26] I hope only to take the first step toward broad comparisons of whole systems.

1.2 Method

If ancient China resembled early modern Europe in both international and domestic politics, then why is it that a coercive universal empire triumphed in the former but checks and balances predominated in the latter? Is it simply because ancient China and early modern Europe are not comparable cases? After all, the two systems represent extreme ends of East and West in terms of culture; they are located on opposite sides of the Eurasian continent in terms of space; and they are separated by more than two millennia of time. As such, these two systems are not amenable to the principle of maximizing underlying commonalities, which requires the researcher to "test the validity of propositions by making comparisons between two situations that are identical except for one variable."[27] However, historically grounded social scientists have observed that the ceteris paribus assumption almost never holds in comparative

[25] Tilly 1992 [1990], 35.
[26] See Buzan and Little 2000; Kaufman 1997; Watson 1992; and Wohlforth et al. 2005.
[27] Jervis 1997, 73.

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history.[28] If scholars were to follow this principle strictly, then comparative studies would be confined to mostly neighboring countries.

To break out of this unnecessary restraint, more and more scholars have set aside universal theories, which make invariable propositions irrespective of contexts, and focused on causal mechanisms, which have varying effects, depending on contexts.[29] As Jon Elster puts it, "The distinctive feature of a mechanism is not that it can be universally applied to predict and control social events, but that it embodies a causal chain that is sufficiently general and precise to enable us to locate it in widely different settings."[30] Douglas McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly even unambiguously abandon the "common foundations" method and advocate the "uncommon foundations" method.[31] They use "paired comparisons of uncommon cases" to find out how recurrent causal mechanisms combine differently with varying initial and environmental conditions to produce radically different outcomes.[32] I adopt this historical-institutionalist approach and pay special attention to initial and environmental conditions, timing, and path dependence.[33] At the same time, I also follow the structural approach common in international politics and examine how the pressure of war compelled similar causal mechanisms across time and space. As Tilly neatly captures it, "Europe shared many political processes with China, but put them together in different sequences, combinations, and environments, with dramatically different consequences."[34]

When we focus on causal mechanisms instead of universal laws, it is also possible to refrain from examining ancient China through the lenses of the European trajectory. Edgar Kiser and Yong Cai study Qin China as "an empirical outlier and a theoretical anomaly" for theories of bureaucratization.[35] Many colleagues in international relations have likewise expected me to address the question "Why did the balance of power

[28] Jervis even speaks of "the perils of using the *ceteris paribus* assumption" because this approach makes it impossible to analyze systemic processes such as feedback effects and the interaction of units and system. Jervis 1997, 76.

[29] Skocpol claims to follow the standard comparative method in her analysis of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions. However, as Goldstone points out, Skocpol does not comply with the standard comparative method and presents no "law" of revolutions. Her argument in fact "delineates a specific historical set of conditions that occurred in similar fashion in several places." Goldstone 1991, 56–57; Skocpol 1979, 40–41.

[30] Elster 1993, 5. [31] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 81–84. [32] Ibid., 83.

[33] Collier and Collier 1991; Katznelson 2003; Mahoney 2000; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003; North 1990; Pierson 2000; Thelen 1999; 2003.

[34] Tilly 1998, 7. [35] Kiser and Cai 2003, 518.

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fail in the ancient Chinese system?"[36] As Bin Wong observes, when we take the European experience as the norm and non-Western experiences as abnormal, we are led "to search for what went wrong in other parts of the world."[37] Another problem with the "Why not?" question is that it presumes "a unidirectionality of social development"[38] and so makes understanding alternative trajectories difficult. Charles Tilly suggests that we should consider "the possibility that the Western experience was a lucky shot, an aberration, a dead end, or simply one among many paths."[39] Hence, I treat ancient China as "a significant case that must be integrally explained by any theory that is to be considered adequate," rather than a "deviant case" that diverges from the European norm.[40]

At the same time, I do not think that Eurocentric theories are necessarily inapplicable to non-European contexts.[41] As Wong points out, "Eurocentric views of the world are inadequate, but they are not necessarily more wrong (or right) than comparisons made from other vantage points."[42] The Sinocentric claim to Chinese uniqueness is particularly problematic. While it is wrong for Europeanists to presume that checks and balance represent the norm, it is also wrong for sinologists to assume that the universal empire and the authoritarian tradition represent the inevitable course of Chinese history. Both views make the mistake of studying history retrospectively by looking at political phenomena at the present and working backward for their causes. Such an approach produces a "certainty of hindsight bias" that blinds us to various "suppressed historical alternatives" or paths not taken.[43] It also buries the "hundreds of states that once flourished but then disappeared."[44] A better approach is to work prospectively by beginning at formative stages in history and searching forward for alternative paths and outcomes.[45]

In tracing Chinese and European histories as they unfold, I also follow Bin Wong's "symmetric perspectives" by evaluating China from the

[36] Chi Hsi-sheng, who examines the "Chinese warlord system" of 1916–1928, follows the "Why not?" approach. He applies Morton Kaplan's balance-of-power theory and asks why various warlords violated many of the essential behavioral rules necessary for system stability. Chi 1968; Kaplan 1979.

[37] Wong 1999, 210; see also Blue and Brook 1999; Sivin 1982.

[38] Kohli and Shue 1994, 310. [39] Tilly 1975, 4.

[40] Blue and Brook 1999, 8. As Arthur Stinchombe puts it, "One does not apply theory to history; rather, one uses history to develop theory." Cited in Goldstone 1991, 39.

[41] Some mainland Chinese scholars have tried to develop an international relations theory "with Chinese characteristics." See Chan 1998.

[42] Wong 1997, 7. [43] Lebow 2000, 559; Mahoney 2000, 530.

[44] Tilly 1992 [1990], 9. [45] Tilly 1975, 14–15; 1992 [1990], 33.

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European perspective *and* evaluating Europe from the Chinese perspective.[46] This approach is tantamount to using early modern Europe as a real "counterfactual China" and ancient China as a real "counterfactual Europe." In the standard counterfactual thought experiment, the analyst asks what would have happened if a hypothesized cause had been absent.[47] But this imaginary counterfactual method is of little use to systems analyses or macrohistorical studies because interrelated phenomena "cannot change one at a time."[48] This difficulty, however, can be solved by using real cases to anchor the counterfactual.[49] In the historical analysis, I examine first ancient China in light of Eurocentric theories and then early modern Europe in light of the ancient Chinese experience.

1.3 Building Blocks for a Dynamic Theory of World Politics

To examine ancient China and early modern Europe as what they are, the research questions should be phrased in a value-free manner: If the two historical cases shared similar processes of interstate and state-society relations, then why did they witness diametrically opposite outcomes? What accounts for the early convergence but eventual divergence of the ancient Chinese and early modern European trajectories? What accounts for the early stability of checks and balances but eventual triumph of domination

[46] Wong 1997, 93. [47] Fearon 1991, 1996; Lebow 2000. [48] Jervis 1997, 73.

[49] Tilly uses imperial China to construct a "counterfactual Europe" to find out under what conditions and by what processes post-Westphalian Europe would have moved closer to Chinese forms of politics, such as "domination by a single encompassing state" and "exclusion of the bulk of the population from direct participation in public politics." Tilly 1998, 5. "To do this counterfactual work," Tilly notes that "we must reverse the Westphalian process, and therefore perhaps the course of the Thirty Years War. . . . We must construct a Holy Roman Empire that emerged from the war not only dominant within its scattered lands but territorially contiguous and formidable along its frontiers. We must conjure up a sufficiently forceful Habsburg monarch – Philip IV, Ferdinand III, or perhaps even Maximilian I of Bavaria – to ally with the pope in uniting Catholic Europe and reconstructing the empire as its bulwark. We must manage more defeats for Gustavus Adolphus and more victories for Wallenstein as well as my non-ancestor Tilly." Tilly 1998, 6–7. Such a scenario of a hegemonic Europe is analogous to what Lebow calls a "miracle counterfactual." Lebow 2000, 565–566. By conjuncturally altering so many historical events in one counterfactual exercise, Tilly would have overstretched the human imagination. But he solves the problem by using a concrete Chinese case to anchor his counterfactual. In addition to historical narratives, computer simulation allows one to "rerun history." See Axelrod 1997; Cederman 1996, 1997; Cusack and Stoll 1990. It is interesting to note that initial conditions are as important in computer simulation as in comparative history. Even when decision rules are held constant, computer simulation generates different results, which are due to random differences in the initial wealth of significant actors and in the order in which actors become active. Axelrod 1997, 139–140.

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