Loud Voices in the China Field

A recent debate in Eurasian economic history
Eurasian economic history has been dominated in the past several years by a sustained debate over the developmental status of late imperial China relative to England: was the early modern Chinese agricultural economy “involutionary,” “stagnant”, or “revolutionary”? Was rural China locked in a hopeless downward spiral of excess population and falling productivity? Or was the Chinese rural economy capable of sustaining rural welfare?
The players

- Wong, R. Bin. 1997. *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience*
- Li, Bozhong. 1998. *Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620-1850*
- Journal of Asian Studies 61:2 2002
The Republican debate

Importance of the debate

- The involution debate poses real questions about China’s institutions and economy.
- It poses more fundamental questions about how best to carry out a comparative economic history across the Eurasian continent.
- It focuses a spotlight on a crucial issue: the importance of approaching China’s history without presuming the “natural-ness” of western economic or political development.
- For a philosopher, it is a fascinating case study in “concrete epistemology of science”
Eurasian economic history

- The large questions—
  - What were the circumstances of productivity and standard of living 1000-1900?
  - Why did sustained economic growth take place in western Europe?
  - Why did China not experience sustained growth in productivity and income in 1700?
  - What were some of the chief factors that explained agricultural change in different regions of Europe and Asia?
Common western narratives of development

- Sustained growth in productivity and living standards from 1700
- Institutions, technology, state behavior
- Scientific revolution
- Replacement of human and animal power by water and steam power; resources replace the organic economy
- Competitive markets; private property
- International trading relations
- Colonialism and the capture of resources and labor from the New World
Eurasian economic history

- What circumstances prevented China’s economy from achieving sustained economic growth—in 1600, in 1800, or in 1900?
- Some common theories –
  - Excessive population growth
  - Exhaustion of resources
  - Defects in the science-technology system
  - Excessively smooth market institutions in handicraft production
The task of economic history

- Demography
- Productivity
- Inputs and technology
- Prices and market conditions
- Property relations and control of labor
- Human welfare
- Causal factors: what factors explain the patterns we observe—institutional, environmental, cultural?
Regional comparisons

- Western Europe versus China?
- England versus lower Yangtze?
- North China versus South and East China?
- England versus France?
- China versus Japan?
Regional comparisons

- One thing we can say confidently is that there was substantial intra-regional diversity in levels and rates of change with respect to defining economic variables across Eurasia: standard of living, total output, output per capita, etc.
- Robert Allen’s research on the real wage demonstrates this diversity for Europe; England, Scandinavia, and Italy show very different profiles of development, real wage, and institutional setting.
- Likewise, Brenner’s treatment of agrarian change in France and England in the early modern period highlights differences among institutions and outcomes.
Pomeranz argues that the most salient comparison is one that identifies medium-sized, complex regions that represent the most advanced form of economic activity in the two countries.

- Not “Western Europe vs. East Asia”
- Not “England vs. China”
- But: English Midlands vs. the Lower Yangtze
Map 1. Southeastern Kiangnan, ca. 1600. Underlining indicates centers of administrative units in which the dike administrator system is known to have been in operation around 1600 (only Hsing-hua, off the map to the north, is not shown). The distribution of these centers suggests that both the need to drain Lake T'ai and the particular circumstances of the cotton belt may have played a part in the creation of the system.
Map 2. Market Towns in the Vicinity of Shanghai, ca. 1470
Map 3. Market Towns in the Vicinity of Shanghai, ca. 1600
Map 4. Market Towns in the Vicinity of Shanghai, ca. 1750
Map 5. Market Towns in the Vicinity of Shanghai, ca. 1870
Terms of comparison

- Land productivity
- Labor productivity
- Use of capital goods – animals, technology
- Standard of living
- Environmental exhaustion
- Sources of energy and other resources
The received view of China

- Persistent, deepening poverty
- Population pressure pushing resources to the margin
- “High level equilibrium trap”
- Environmental exhaustion
- Revolution results from immiseration
- Failure of modernization results from crushing poverty
Tawney’s assessment

- Buck, John Lossing. 1937. *Land Utilization in China*
- “There is even some reason to believe that, with the increased pressure on the land caused by the growth of population, the condition of the rural population, in some parts of China, may be actually worse than it was two centuries ago . . . . It is difficult to resist the conclusion that a large proportion of Chinese peasants are constantly on the brink of actual destitution” (Tawney 1932: 71-72).
The case for involution

- Chayanov, A. V., *The Theory of Peasant Economy*; Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*

- Philip Huang: the Yangzi Delta was on an involutionary trajectory in the early-modern time period, involving Malthusian crisis (population exceeding food production), falling labor productivity, rising intensity of land use, falling marginal product, and falling living standards.

- Huang attributes this self-exploitation to the combined effects of family farming, substantial population increase, and extremely limited arable land.
Environmental exhaustion (Elvin)

- Elvin argues that “environmental pressure” might have functioned as a formidable barrier to China’s adoption of modern economic forms and manufacturing systems: the sunk costs of control of the environment made it difficult to consider adoption of an entirely different system of production.
Critique of involution

- China’s early-modern rural economy was comparable in productivity and standard of living to that of England in 1600-1800 (Pomeranz)
- Population behavior in China did not reflect Malthusian crisis or positive checks (Lee)
- China’s economy was improving significantly in the early decades of the twentieth century (Rawski, Brandt)
The case for parity

- Pomeranz: China’s rural economy was roughly as productive as England’s in 1700, and that the rural standard of living in the lower Yangzi region was approximately the same as that of rural England in the same period (Pomeranz 2000).

- Pomeranz holds that Huang gives too little attention to the importance of the differences between land-intensive and labor-intensive agriculture.
The case for parity

- Pomeranz asserts that broad features of Yangzi Delta agricultural productivity, handicraft productivity, standard of living, and demographic behavior were generally similar across the two cases.
- Economic “breakthrough” in the English case was the result of a highly contingent, non-systemic factor—the acquisition of significant natural resources and labor in the Americas.
Chinese agricultural technology

- Highly intensive use of land
- Multiple cropping
- Fertilizer advances (beancake)
- Sophisticated water management
The case against Malthus


The case against Malthus

- Lee and Li maintain that the lower Yangzi River basin was not characterized by a Malthusian crisis. Instead, they argue that China’s demographic regime was stable and resulted in controlled fertility. Lee and Feng maintain that more detailed study of China’s demographic systems at the level of the family result in similar demographic outcomes to those experienced in early modern Europe (Lee and Feng 1999).
The Eurasian Population Project

- an approach to historical demography that is intended to provide a substantially more detailed understanding of the historical trajectory of demography in different parts of the Eurasian land mass—population size, nuptiality, fertility, mortality, etc., as well as a more empirically constrained set of hypotheses about the causes of changes in these factors over time

- makes use of 2.5 million longitudinally linked individual records in over a dozen locations across Eurasia.
The Eurasian Population Project

• “New data and new methods … have begun to illuminate the complexities of demographic responses to exogenous stress, economic and otherwise…. Combined time-series and event-history analyses of longitudinal, nominative, microlevel data now allow for the finely grained differentiation of mortality, fertility, and other demographic responses by social class, household context, and other dimensions at the individual level” ((Bengtsson and al 2004) : viii-ix).
Productivity

- Bozhong Li’s studies of Jiangnan farming provide much of the empirical base that is used by others in attempting to arrive at estimates of farm productivity and rural incomes in the lower Yangzi. Li’s studies contradict the assertion that labor productivity was declining in the early modern period in the lower Yangzi Delta.
- Rather, prior to the 20th century Li finds that the Chinese farm economy experienced steady labor productivity and rising land productivity, resulting in a level standard of living for rural workers and farmers.
- Robert Allen’s detailed farm models for England and Jiangnan; cost accounting
Agricultural Labor Productivity (Allen 2003)
Standard of living

- How do we measure historical standards of living for the purpose of comparison?
- How do we estimate the rate and nature of change?
• Robert Allen’s sophisticated and data-rich methodology for assessing standard of living based on a “wage basket” based on diet; prices of food goods and several other key products; and wage and price data. Two ways of comparing across economies: silver content and calorie content.

• Allen concludes for the middle of the 18th century, that “using the price of a calorie as a deflator indicates that there was little difference in the standard of living of English, Chinese, and Japanese farm workers. . . . Asia did not lag behind Europe” ((Allen 2005)).
This estimate is for a time period that falls within the period of dispute between Pomeranz and Huang, and it clearly favors the Pomeranz position. Moreover, he finds that the Chinese standard of living rose substantially between 1700 and 1900: “The standard of living in the Yangzi rose by over 40% between the early eighteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Allen 2005).
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## Real Wages of Farm Workers, Calorie Price Deflator (Allen 2005)

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Assessment

- Economic parity in the early modern period
- No Malthusian crisis; no unconstrained tendency towards population increase up to the carrying capacity of the land; instead, fertility rates and rates of population increase essentially comparable to those of European populations.
- Standard of living for rural people was comparable in England and the lower Yangtze
- Labor productivity was comparable in England and the lower Yangtze.
- This is a debate that is largely resolvable through additional empirical-historical research; not a “paradigm shift.”
Importance for China Studies

- Why are these debates important for the field of China studies?
- New interpretations of the Chinese Revolution
- New interpretations of the economic dynamics of rural Chinese society
- New support for a “China-centered” approach to the study of Chinese history
- Challenge to the central narrative of economic growth
Conclusion

• Consider China’s historical development—economic, agricultural, political, social, military—in its own terms, informed by the best available social theoretical insights and concepts;
• identify China’s own “paradigms” of development, its own pathways of political development and economic change;
• use those new-found paradigms to inflect our understanding of the processes of other parts of the world.
Finally, let us recognize that large processes of development are deeply contingent and path-dependent.

There is no reason to expect that all great civilizations will go through the same series of “stages”, crises, or institutional solutions.

It is this deep contingency of history that makes comparative historical research rewarding and insightful.
End