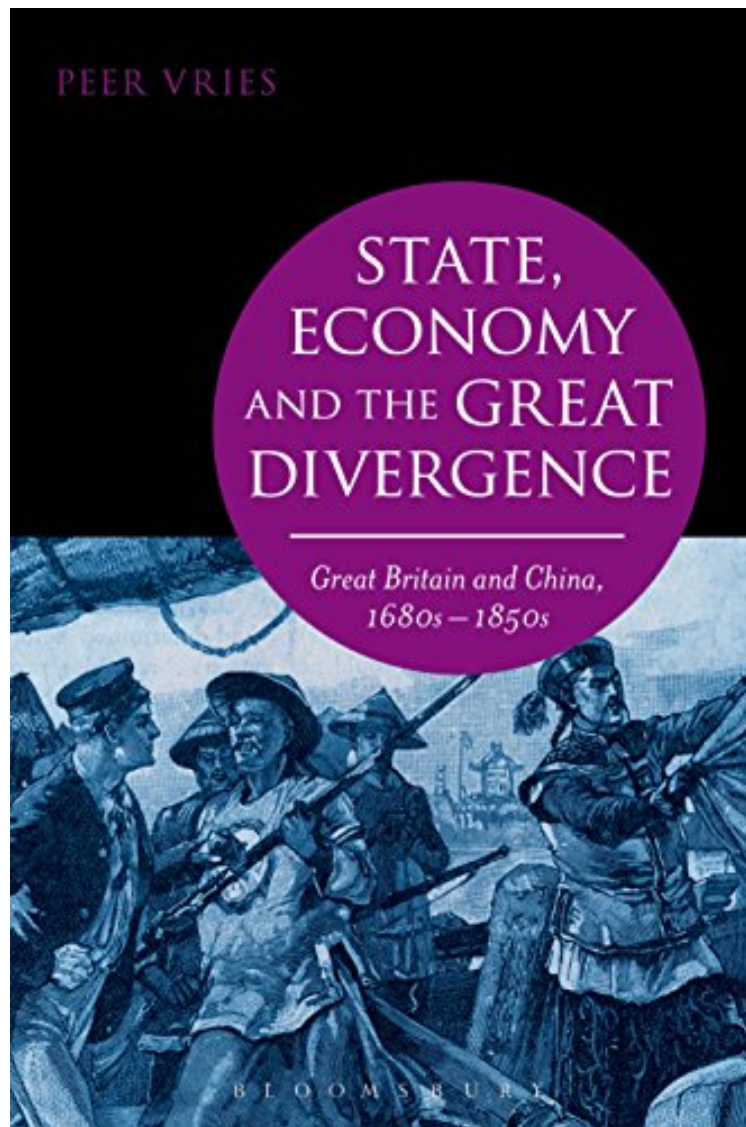


[Download ebook] State, Economy and the Great Divergence: Great Britain and China, 1680s-1850s

State, Economy and the Great Divergence: Great Britain and China, 1680s-1850s

Peer Vries

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Peer Vries : State, Economy and the Great Divergence: Great Britain and China, 1680s-1850s before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised State, Economy and the Great Divergence: Great Britain and China, 1680s-1850s:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A good deal of important evidence; mainly for people who study history seriouslyBy Peter McCluskeyYet another book on why Britain and China diverged dramatically starting around 1800. This one focuses on documenting the differences between the regions, with relatively little

theorizing. Some interesting differences of possible relevance to the divergence: - British per capita tax collections were 15 times China's [1]; Vries emphasizes the underlying British bureaucratic competence. - Britain changed its tax rules often; China treated tax rules as if set in stone. - British tax policy caused it to promote standardization of a wide variety of weights and measures, which helped long-distance trades; China had nothing similar. - Britain's taxation was more egalitarian than China's (but still much less egalitarian than today). - British government debt looked recklessly high; China consistently had a surplus. - British elites wanted to keep the masses poor (to make them industrious); China's elites seemed neutral or had slight preferences for the poor to prosper. - Most British workers were nearly slaves - laws restricted their mobility due to the expectation that most who left their area of work were beggars/thieves; China was less restrictive. - Britain condoned or supported powerful monopolies; China broke up concentrations of merchant power / capital under the assumption that they came at the expense of ordinary people. - Britain had three times as much farm land per capita as China. - Britain was more urban, so it had more commercial / monetary activity. - China denied that anything outside its borders mattered. Britain had a fairly global worldview. *** Mercantilism *** Vries says Britain was more mercantilist than modern economists claim, and that mercantilism was probably good for Britain. I still think mercantilism was mildly harmful. There were enough other differences between regions that one set of mildly harmful policies can easily be offset by other good policies. Why did people at the time support mercantilism? I'm sure I could come up with hypotheses about why they were simply wrong. But the book suggests a more interesting possibility: they cared mostly about the success of their government compared to neighboring governments, and willingly embraced negative-sum competition. China was less mercantilist (Vries calls it "agrarian paternalist"), due to factors such as complacency about its status relative to the outside world, and due to less need for international trade, given that its size meant that the equivalent of trade between Britain and France got treated as inter-province trade. *** Implications for Competing Explanations *** The main target of this book is Pomeranz's book *The Great Divergence*, which has received undue respect in academia [2]. According to Vries, Pomeranz was too eager to deny institutional and cultural differences; Pomeranz exaggerated the differences in access to a frontier - China had a frontier that was somewhat like Britain's North American land; obscured by being within China's nominal border; China failed to adequately use the coal that it had access to, due to apathy and/or incompetence. Vries may be slightly unfair to Pomeranz at times, but Vries seems mostly more right than Pomeranz. Comparing to some other explanations: * Vries' analysis sounds quite similar to Fukuyama's *Political Order and Political Decay*, especially on the significance of European military competition being more intense than for China. * Clark's *Farewell to Alms* - seems slightly strengthened by Vries' evidence. Nick Szabo's ideas about the printing press - seems consistent with Vries' evidence, but not clearly strengthened by this evidence * Bernstein's *Birth of Plenty* - Vries argues against Bernstein's claim that Britain had more secure property rights when the divergence began, but supports Bernstein's claims about good communication/transportation, and Bernstein's other claims are compatible with Vries' evidence. Bernstein's ideas could be altered to focus much more on the cultural factors that eventually led to secure property rights. That would water down the libertarian implications that Bernstein seems to want, but wouldn't drastically change Bernstein's points. *** Methods / Style *** Was Vries wise to focus on the 1680-1850 time period? I'm fairly confident that the divergence became nearly inevitable before 1800, and I wouldn't be surprised if the main causes were firmly entrenched by 1680. So I'm a bit concerned that this book focuses more on symptoms than underlying causes. Vries is less clear than I'd like about the problems associated with comparing two very different sized nations. He partly handles this by sometimes referring to larger parts of Europe. He almost never compares Britain to the Yangzi Delta region (which Pomeranz claims was most comparable to Britain). I found the book's style to be somewhat difficult. It's aimed mostly at serious historians, with often more detail than I wanted, and many complaints about mistakes made by other historians. I bought this book before noticing that Vries had previously written another book on this subject, and it seems quite possible that I chose the wrong one for my goals. *** Conclusion *** The book left me more pessimistic about ever getting a clear answer to what caused the great divergence. There are too many hypotheses, and only one divergence at this level of development, so there's no practical way to falsify many of them. [1] - the book indicates that it's less clear whether the regions differed much in how burdensome the taxes were, so this evidence is more compatible with libertarianism than it superficially appears. Vries mostly refers to how much tax revenue the central government received, which was often very different from what the taxpayers paid, especially in China. [2] - I have an abundance of cynical ideas for why Pomeranz is popular: his writing style is atrocious, so that having taken the effort needed to understand him can function as a mark of high status; he appeals to environmentalist intuitions; multiculturalists need something like Pomeranz's approach in order to claim that all cultures are equally good. 0 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Customer Love it 2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Critical in the Best Sense By R. Albin This book is an excellent example of using comparative historical analysis to address major questions. The general issue is the "Great Divergence" between western Europe and Qing China in the 18th and early 19th century. Vries focuses on 2 specific questions. One; to what extent was 18th century Britain the Smithian society that many economists and some historians see as a necessary and sufficient condition for industrialization? Second; were Qing China and "Europe" approximately equivalent in terms of governmental-social-economic organization, as argued recently by some

historians? Vries method is a detailed comparison of Britain and Qing China, attempting to be as quantitative as possible. Vries is very aware of the limitations of the data, and seems to be very careful with his comparisons, arguing convincingly that even order of magnitude comparisons are useful. Vries opens with a very good historiographic chapter to define the issues, setting the stage for his analyses. He then works through a series of systematic chapters treating various aspects of the British-Qing comparison. These include taxation and the financial powers of the British and Qing states, military performance and relative power, the nature and extent of the bureaucracies, the role of these states in the larger economies, the nature of British and Qing imperialism, and what he calls the "legibility" of these states; how it penetrated the consciousness of their subjects. Contrary to the conclusions of many economists and some economic historians, Vries shows Britain to be a relatively interventionist, relatively powerful, and strongly mercantilist state functioning in the context of the highly competitive and aggressive European state system. Vries argues well that this phenomenon was a key to British industrialization, strongly undermining the arguments of quite a few economists. As a complementary conclusion, Vries shows that Qing China was a much weaker state and generally less dynamic economy, in part related to the absence of state direction. While Vries' conclusions will not surprise many experienced readers, this book is very strongly argued and I doubt that Vries analyses can be rebutted by the objects of his critique. This is an excellent contribution to the debates over the Great Divergence, and indirectly, to discussions of the nature of economic modernization.

State, Economy and the Great Divergence provides a new analysis of what has become the central debate in global economic history: the 'great divergence' between European and Asian growth. Focusing on early modern China and Western Europe, in particular Great Britain, this book offers a new level of detail on comparative state formation that has wide-reaching implications for European, Eurasian and global history. Beginning with an overview of the historiography, Peer Vries goes on to extend and develop the debate, critically engaging with the huge volume of literature published on the topic to date. Incorporating recent insights, he offers a compelling alternative to the claims to East-West equivalence, or Asian superiority, which have come to dominate discourse surrounding this issue. This is a vital update to a key issue in global economic history and, as such, is essential reading for students and scholars interested in keeping up to speed with the on-going debates.

“This book is an impressive economic comparison between Western Europe (especially Britain) and China during the long eighteenth century. It is a much needed and balanced account that tries, I think on the whole successfully, to not succumb to either a Euro-centric or China-centric interpretation. It engages with all the main themes pertinent to such a history but, ultimately, its originality lies in emphasising the Western European, particularly Britain's, form of state. The ability to raise revenues to fund expensive wars and colonial expansion has a ramification that, ultimately, is the primary key to the ‘Great Divergence’ with China.” William J. Ashworth, Senior Lecturer in History, University of Liverpool, UK
Peer Vries turns traditional political economy on its head: instead of an open, laissez-faire British economy confronting an oppressive and centralized Imperial state in China in the 18th century, Vries shows us a fiscal-mercantilist Britain extracting enormous taxes and a decentralized and inefficient Chinese government receiving rather few. Moreover, Vries argues that British industrial success arose because of – not in spite of – Britain's high taxation supporting an aggressively mercantilist and imperialist state. This deeply learned book will challenge both traditionalists' and ‘California School’ revisionists' view of the Great Divergence; it marks a powerful new turn and major advance in understanding the origins of modern economies.” Jack A. Goldstone, Professor of Public Policy, George Mason University, USA
Professor Peer Vries' new book is a continuation of his decade-long pursuit for a better answer to a cluster of puzzles associated with the 'Great Divergence' that set Western Europe and China historically apart. Unlike the conventional views that look at a wide range of variables such as natural endowments, population, factor productivities, market activities, real wages and GDP, the author identifies the state as the prime mover in Eurasian history. The rise of the West was thus a result of a pushy 'visible hand' that dictated the allocation of key resources. He also probes further into the process and mechanisms of state-building by the elite that held political, ideological, legal, economic and military powers. Thus, the seed of the Great Divergence was planted by the elites in Western Europe and China long before 1700 AD. Professor Vries's path-breaking work re-sets our debate in global history.” Kent G. Deng, Professor of Economic History, London School of Economics, UK
About the Author Peer Vries is University Professor at the Institute for Economic and Social History, University of Vienna, Austria.