Why did short-lasting emperors in Chinese history often rule a strong state while long-lasting emperors governed a weak one? In his recently published book, *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China*, Yuhua Wang offers a new interpretation of state-society relations. He asserts that the Chinese imperial state formation is distinct from that of Europe in that durability led to economic and fiscal stagnation, rather than political and economic development. Wang argues that the imperial Chinese state’s ability to collect taxes and mobilize the population relied on a constantly redefined political equilibrium involving the social strata of central and local elites. The elite social sphere forced the state to make a difficult choice, creating a trade-off between state power and ruler longevity. The achievement of one comes at the cost of the other, making these goals incompatible. Wang’s response to his research puzzle is that the state serves as the arena of conflict where the centralized ruler and the socially powerful elites with managerial authority engage in a struggle for dominance. He posits that "state weakness is a social problem that cannot be resolved with a bureaucratic solution" (p. 220). In his conclusion, Wang notes that the Communist Party succeeded in state building in post-1949 China because it approached this state weakness issue through a social revolution.

Wang’s book provides two key insights into the history of Chinese state making, for comparison with other societies and in terms of chronology. First, the book argues that violence, rather than being a catalyst for state formation as was the case in Western Europe, led to the destruction of the imperial Chinese state’s centralization of social relations. Instead, the partnership between rulers and elites is the cornerstone of political durability and good governance. Second, rather than focusing solely on the state development during the Qin period or state collapse during the Qing period as many scholars have done, this book takes a broad-
er approach by ambitiously examining the evolution of the state over a span of two thousand years. Wang suggests a classification system consisting of three primary network structures that reflect the terrain of elite society: star networks, which involve central elites linking widely dispersed groups geographically; bowtie networks, in which fragmented elites only connect with their localized social groups; and ring networks, in which local elites gain their positions through civil examination degrees, and regional or clan interests, and who have no connections with each other or with any major social groups located at the center. The disruption and re-creation of these elite networks is mainly framed by historical moments, such as civil wars like the An Lushan and Taiping rebellions and fiscal reforms like those of Wang Anshi and Zhang Juzheng. In his final remark, Wang briefly juxtaposes the role of elites in state making with other non-Western world contexts and takes Mao Zedong’s Communist revolution in land reforms and social relations of production as a modern intervention that created a new incentive to strengthen Chinese state power, bypassing the elite social network.

The book’s core content is the application of the aforementioned framework to China’s state evolution from the Tang to the Qing. Chapter 3 details the governance of China by an aristocratic elite during the Tang dynasty. This group of elites was linked to social groups across the nation through a closely knit marriage network, creating a star network. Although these elites used state power to protect their diverse interests, their centralization made them vulnerable to rebellions. In chapter 4, the Anshi Rebellion destroyed the aristocracy, creating a power vacuum that shifted China’s elite social terrain to a more fragmented bowtie network. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the change in elite terrain during the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, when elites represented diverse local interests rather than a “star network.” Emperors pitted these fragmented elites against each other, weakening state power while consolidating their own rule. Chapters 7 and 8 highlight the failure of the Qing dynasty. During this era, localized elites formed social cooperatives to provide security and services without state intervention. When the Opium Wars weakened the state’s ability to quell violence and provide public goods, fragmentation accelerated and elite social relations shifted to a ring network. The state allowed the elites to form private militias to quell the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64), which hastened the state’s downfall and the rise of warlordism.

Wang’s book provides a well-articulated theoretical approach to framing state formation from a non-Western perspective, which challenges many existing theories based on Western models. Wang also employs a wealth of quantitative data and analytical tools, such as tombstone epitaphs, biographical data on major officials, and geospatial information from the China Historical Geographical Information System. It serves as an excellent guide for students interested in understanding elite politics in traditional China.

However, Wang’s book also raises the question of the extent to which modern China has truly overcome the dynastic mode of state making, or as he frames it, “overcome the sovereign’s dilemma by embarking on a new path of state development that fosters strength and durability” (p. 219). The brief statement at the conclusion lacks a definitive and persuasive response. As Wang himself acknowledges, China underwent a century of chaos and violence from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and the Communist takeover of mainland China was not an exception. It is a matter of fact that Mao’s state-led terror dismantled many existing social relations within China in post-1949, as evidenced by the prevalence of peasant resistance to grain procurement during the 1950s reported in Internal Reference (Neibu Cankao). A massive state machinery controlled by the Communist Party came into existence, which quickly became an interested group dominating every aspect of Chinese society, not just the public
good but also such sectors as food, electricity, petroleum, tobacco, and sugar. This elite strata continues to negotiate powers with the state as always. Indeed, this apparatus shares similarities with the Qing’s Manchu and Han diarchy, which emphasized noble bloodlines, ethnic balance, cyclical rotation of posts, and systemic assessment. While China has made progress in revamping its physical infrastructure and manufacturing capabilities, doubts persist about whether its leadership has successfully addressed the issue of dependence on a self-interested and increasingly alienated elite social terrain.

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