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Wenkai He. Paths toward the Modern Fiscal State: England, Japan, and China.

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Why does Belmessous examine these particular case studies? Unfortunately, she does not offer much of an explanation. Few direct comparisons are drawn among the three cases, and the broader patterns she discerns deserve greater attention than they receive. She argues, for example, that the differences between the early modern French case and the nineteenth-century British case reveal a shift by both empires from a religious to a legal conception of assimilation, a conclusion that is problematic both because it fails to provide comparative evidence that the French and British pursued the same assimilationist policies in each of these periods and because it asserts in the British case the ideological representativeness of a single individual, Saxe Bannister, while ignoring the fact that the contemporaneous evangelical movement and missionary enterprise exerted enormous influence on British attitudes toward indigenous peoples. Other promising lines of comparative inquiry receive scant attention. Belmessous acknowledges that settlers were key players in the struggle over assimilationist policies in each of her case studies, but she gives no comparative consideration of their contributions. She notes that miscegenation loomed large in the strategy of assimilation introduced in French North America, but neglects its contribution in the other two cases. Australian officials, for example, sought to “breed out” Aborigines by means of miscegenation. And Belmessous might have acknowledged that the indigenous elites who embraced assimilation in colonial Algeria had counterparts in other colonies.

For all its limitations as a comparative study, *Assimilation and Empire* is an informative, valuable work. The geographical and chronological range of its inquiry is impressive, and each case is investigated in considerable depth, with evidence drawn from a plenitude of primary and secondary sources. Moreover, Belmessous has much to say that is fresh and illuminating about French and British policies toward indigenous peoples. Above all, her book serves as a useful reminder that the utopian desire to remake other peoples in the idealized image of oneself was an integral aspect of both countries’ imperial projects.

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WENKAI HE. *Paths toward the Modern Fiscal State: England, Japan, and China*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 2013. Pp. x, 313. \$55.00.

The fiscal breakdown of Qing China, which opened the way for the Chinese revolution of 1911, was surely one of the most important events of the twentieth century. But why was the Qing state vulnerable to fiscal breakdown? It had a productive system of land taxes and excises. Responsibility for assessing and collecting taxes was in the hands of salaried bureaucrats who were selected by competitive examination and subject to rigorous bookkeeping requirements enforced by annual audits. A developed market economy provided those bureaucrats with resources to tax, central points for tax

collection, and price information that they could use to assess liability. It also provided them with credit instruments and banking networks that they could have used to remit payment over long distances. Why didn’t all of this add up to a reliable stream of revenues?

According to Wenkai He, the answer is that Qing officials were averse to debt, and therefore deprived themselves of an important means to smooth their revenues over crisis periods. By contrast, He offers the examples of governments in England (1642–1752) and Japan (1868–1895) that successfully issued unsecured short-term debts to meet urgent and unexpected military expenses. The need to refinance those short-term debts led to a period of sustained fiscal experimentation, culminating in a formula that He calls “the modern fiscal state”: a permanent debt consisting of long-term government bonds backed by a stable stream of revenues from centrally collected custom duties and excises. This formula, he argues, was the key to the fiscal resilience of those empires.

The Qing state could have hit on this formula, too. He draws on archival sources to reconstruct debates among Qing officials. He shows that they attempted to issue paper notes to meet unexpected military expenses in the 1850s. But those notes did not create a chronic debt crisis; instead, they simply failed to circulate, because the state was fighting regional rebellions that had disrupted domestic trade and credit networks. Revenue officials therefore directed their creative energies toward finding new ways to meet immediate fiscal needs out of current revenues. The absence of paper notes complicated attempts to centralize tax revenues, because the roads were not safe for movements of large quantities of specie. Officials therefore improvised an increasingly baroque system of “assignment orders” by which they directed excise tax revenues from provincial treasuries toward specific public expenditures in neighboring provinces without first collecting them into a central account. This system suppressed tax revenues by leaving excise duties in the hands of provincial governors who competed to attract long-distance trade. It also eroded the quality of information available to the central government as provincial officials resorted to creative accounting to circumvent increasingly rigid earmarks. The decentralized system ultimately deprived the Qing state of the ability to mobilize resources where and when it needed them.

The juxtaposition of three such different histories necessarily strips each narrative of much of its context. Some such sacrifice is inevitable in any comparative history on this scale, and the reward for this decontextualizing move, when it is done well, is that stripping away context can reveal the skeleton of an alternative narrative. Here it is done well. Among the book’s most interesting and provocative arguments are claims about which contextual factors did *not* matter. He argues, for example, against the classic argument of Douglass C. North and Barry R. Weingast, that Parliament is relatively unimportant to explaining the long-term creditworthiness of the English state. He also argues,

against generations of economic historians, that geopolitical competition was not the driving force for fiscal innovation. The latter negative conclusion may be an artifact of He's conceptualization of the "modern fiscal state," which does not include such staples of modern war finance as income taxes; it may also be an artifact of his periodization, which stops English history shy of the Napoleonic wars, and stops Chinese and Japanese history before the First World War. For He, what mattered for the development of the modern fiscal state was not military competition or parliamentary negotiation, but the credit crises and the processes of fiscal experimentation that they prompted.

Although any comparative history requires heroic feats of abstraction, the lessons of this particular comparative history are perhaps not quite as abstract and general as He intends. His introductory chapter frames the book as a contribution to an exceedingly abstract social science literature on how institutions—*any* institutions—emerge. In fact, the book has little to tell us about this question in general, because its most general argument is that public debts are *unlike* other institutions. A public debt creates a collective obligation that binds officials, and the need to preserve creditworthiness commits them to a common process of problem-solving and learning from experience. Revenue officials are often among the most highly motivated students of fiscal history.

That does not mean that they draw the correct lessons. By the 1890s, for example, He argues that it would have been possible to create a Bank of China, perhaps modeled on the Bank of England, that could have issued paper notes and lent freely to tide the state over periods of economic or military crisis; but Board of Revenue officials persisted in recommending against this policy, mainly because they continued to generalize inappropriately from the experience of the 1850s. If those officials had drawn a different lesson from that historical episode, history might have taken a different course.

Paths toward the Modern Fiscal State, indeed, can be read as a kind of cautionary tale about overgeneralizing from particular historical experiences. Historians who persevere past the abstract theorizing of the introductory chapter will find it a stimulating book, not least because it uses the abstractions and comparative methods of social science to show that interpretations of particular historical events can have enormous consequences.

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EMILY S. ROSENBERG, editor. *A World Connecting, 1870–1945*. (A History of the World.) Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 2012. Pp. 1161. \$39.95.

As a field of serious scholarly research, world history has come a long way since the turn of the twenty-first century. The essays by seven eminent scholars in *A*

World Connecting indicate the greater acceptance of a field once marginalized as overly synthetic or as relevant only to teachers. Although not without its shortcomings, this volume represents a sustained attempt to engage with the problem of how to imagine and write the world's past in truly global terms.

Edited by Emily S. Rosenberg, a professor at the University of California at Irvine who specializes in transnational and global history from a U.S. perspective, this is the first volume to be published in Akira Iriye and Jürgen Osterhammel's six-volume series *A History of the World*. With its temporal focus on the period 1870–1945, it will be volume five, as the series explores the global past chronologically from the ancient past to the present. After an introduction by Rosenberg, there are five thematic "chapters," interpretive essays that explore the invention of the modern state, empires, migration, commodity chains, and transnational connections. The essays are lengthy, ranging between 149 and 253 pages. The result is a volume just shy of a whopping 1,000 pages, excluding back matter.

Charles S. Maier, who specializes in modern European and international history at Harvard University, leads off with "Leviathan 2.0: Inventing Modern Statehood." His stated purpose is to chronicle "the ascent and transformations of the modern state" (p. 39). Yet contrary to the temporal scope of the book, he does not limit himself to the period after 1870. In fact, the first 100 pages of the essay are devoted to demonstrating changes wrought to the state system in the first half of the nineteenth century—particularly between 1850 and 1880. Those last thirty years, Maier argues, represented a crucial period of change for states in many parts of the world, as they were torn apart and put back together. By the time we reach 1870, as Maier puts it, "states were trump" (p. 149). In other words, the modern state form based on the consolidation of territory, the subjugation of marginal peoples, the collaboration of middle classes, and the use of violence both internally and externally had become the international standard by 1870, and by 1945 it had been exported around the world. Yet while Maier's essay is detailed, erudite, and wide-ranging, his interpretation is firmly centered in the tradition of the "West" acting on and influencing "the Rest." This is perhaps not surprising given his areas of specialization, but its tone is nevertheless at odds with more recent world historical research that seeks alternate ways of imagining the recent past in ways that at least complicate such a Eurocentric view.

In "Empires and the Reach of the Global," two highly respected empire historians, Tony Ballantyne (University of Otago) and Antoinette Burton (University of Chicago), convincingly argue that the history of empire in this period was in many ways commensurate with global history. This was so not only because of the vast and growing size of empires during this time, but also because even states that retained sovereignty in this period were affected by empire. In just under 150 pages, Ballantyne and Burton manage to explore empire as a material, on-the-ground phenomenon bolstered by