The Economic History of China: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century. By Richard von Glahn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 461. £64.99 cloth, £24.99 paper.

There is no other book quite like Richard von Glahn's *The Economic History of China: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century*—and few people who could attempt one. On the one hand the book provides an enormously useful reference guide for scholars: a roughly 400-page review essay covering the scholarship in English, Chinese, Japanese, and a bit of French on topics that spread across over thirty centuries of history. On the other, it provides a very readable large-scale narrative that a diligent undergraduate could follow, and that could provide the backbone for what would otherwise be almost unteachable courses in the long-run history of what will soon be the world's largest economy.

Von Glahn tells us that his goal is "a coherent, synthetic narrative of the development of the Chinese economy over the very long term" (p. 7), in which he emphasizes being as accurate as he can about specific sub-topics and sub-periods, while eschewing any overarching thesis. He does, however, emphasize his rejection of two possible forms of synthesis, First, he does not believe that any theory of "stages" is useful in describing Chinese economic development. While he does not go into detail about this point, I take it to mean that he does not see discontinuities so dramatic that that the economy as a whole had a fundamentally different character after event X than it had before—the way that, say, an orthodox Marxist might say that a capitalist economy is fundamentally different from a feudal one, or even the way that Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson[1] posit a fundamental distinction (for colonized societies) between the moments before and after fundamental property rights are established. Second, von Glahn's book "disavows . . . the idea that the market is *the* driving force in economic development and the creation of wealth. Modern economic growth (and this was true of premodern economic growth as well) principally derives not from the expansion of markets, but rather from innovations fostered by new knowledge and technology. The narrow attention economic historians have focused on the market has obscured the impact of other institutions—most notably, the state—in promoting economic development" (pp. 7–8). By "development" here, von Glahn presumably means per capita growth, occupational differentiation, and so on. Another important dimension of Chinese economic history—which he does not neglect, even if it is left out of this statement—is demographic expansion.

[1] Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A. Robinson, "The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation," *American Economic Revie*w 91, no. 5 (December 2001), pp. 1369–1401.

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Indeed, it may be the most remarkable part of that story, prior to the twentieth century: not because Malthusian mechanisms drive Chinese economic history, as some have claimed, but because China had managed for so long to support growing numbers of people without a decline in living standards. So, too, changes in the degree of economic inequality and in the degree to which poor people were able to be independent of local elites figure in von Glahn's story—but mostly as outcomes of other processes, rather than causes.

Von Glahn provides very useful accounts of the spread of some key technologies, from bronze and iron metallurgy to pottery and porcelain, early-ripening rice, and various aspects of silk and cotton textile production. "Technology" as a general concept, however, does not feature very prominently in his account. It appears eleven times in the index, mostly in discussions of the nineteenth century, and often in comments remarking on a relative paucity of technological change. He avoids the debates among Joseph Needham, Mark Elvin, Nathan Sivin, Benjamin Elman, Joel Mokyr, and others over the nature of Chinese science and possible explanations (either institutional or cultural) for changes in the rate of technological innovation,[2] concentrating instead on the diffusion of those innovations that did occur. Diffusion is, of course, necessary for even the cleverest technological change to become economically significant. It also tends to be better documented than invention: particularly in China, where many of the biggest technological innovations (e.g., paper, the compass) are very old, while others, though economically significant, were so incremental in nature that it is quite likely either that nobody remarked on their initial invention, or that they were invented several times. (Using the dregs from pressing soybean oil as fertilizer is one such instance that had a huge impact.)

Focusing on diffusion, and on technology in its broadest sense—including innovations such as bills of exchange, which work by establishing new ways for people to work with each other, rather than by manipulating the physical world in new ways—often (though not always) places the state in the foreground. While most new technologies and adoptions thereof reflected private actions, officials built large water conservancy projects that allowed other people to build more local ones

[2] The relevant literature is far too large to list here. For a few some notable examples, see Joseph Needham, *Clerks and Craftsmen in China and the West: Lectures and Addresses on the History of Science and Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1973); Nathan Sivin, ed., *Science and Technology in East Asia* (New York: Science History Publications, 1977); Benjamin Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Joel Mokyr, *A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

and/or to adopt crops that needed irrigation; spread information about technological best practices; produced high-end products in centralized workshops; and shaped (for better or worse) the incentives to pursue particular kinds of learning, trade, and production. Not coincidentally, then, one of this book's greatest strengths is as a history of Chinese political economy that explores the changing nature of the state/society interface and the causes and economic consequences of changing government policies.

Near the end of his introduction, von Glahn lays out a hypothesis about the state's role in China's long-term economic development that, he says, "should be subjected to rigorous research and analysis" (p. 10), and with which he seems to sympathize (as I do). His description of it is worth quoting at length:

> Just as the economy evolved over time, so did the state and its institutions. The dialectic between the fiscal operations of the state and the wider economy yielded divergent results under different historical circumstances and ideological commitments. From a Schumpeterian perspective, at times the Chinese imperial state galvanized economic growth by providing domestic peace, international security, and investment in public goods—education, welfare, transport systems, water control, and standardized market institutions—as well as creating an institutional infrastructure that enabled Smithian growth in agriculture and commerce. The state's role in creating demand (including war-making) also figured significantly in stimulating economic development. During the late imperial era, China's rulers embraced the Neo-Confucian ideological abhorrence (not unlike that of neoclassical economics) to state interference in the private economy. Although this commitment to light taxation and minimal state intrusion—a far cry from the "oriental despotism" imagined by Western social theorists!—had positive effects in encouraging Smithian dynamics of economic expansion, the weak infrastructural capacity of the state limited the potential for economic growth along Schumpeterian lines as was happening concurrently in early modern Europe. (pp. 9–10)

The Western Zhou (1054–770 B.C.E.) economy, as von Glahn describes it, was one in which great families, including the royal household, lived off land and labour over which they had rights by virtue of their lineage's position; taxation (in the sense of fees extracted from property, output, and transactions originating within a private sector) did not exist, and the king's theoretical rights to reassign various possessions as the perquisites of appointive offices were limited in practice (and became more so as the dynasty weakened). Land did change hands through private agreements, but never in a simple exchange for anything we could call "money"; instead these were ritually complex transactions, which did not occur in an open market with multiple potential buyers able to compete with each other. Indeed, money itself did not exist in the Western Zhou: though cowries were sometimes used as a measure of value, they were not a means of exchange, and were valued as much for their uses in ritual as anything else. In short, that the state had little power beyond its own properties did not mean that an underlying "economy," born of a universal urge to truck and barter, was thereby liberated and invigorated; it would, instead, need to be created, often in part by state intervention. For quite some time, then—and at other key points later—state and economy grew in tandem, in what was anything but a zero-sum game.

The key question for states in the competition that followed the decline of the Zhou centre—and especially after that competition intensified in the sixth century B.C.E.—was how to enhance their war-making capacity. Most of them were small city-states with little direct power over their rural hinterlands; however, this became an increasingly vulnerable political form as the spread of iron metallurgy (especially from the fifth century onwards) made mass infantry-based armies far more powerful than small groups of chariot-based aristocrats. Iron tools for agriculture and other civilian purposes followed, as did other technologies that made possible a larger surplus than before. All of this rewarded states that could bring more land under cultivation—by providing property rights in return for taxes, settling immigrants (including former pastoralists), building irrigation and flood control works, and so on. States on the geographic periphery were best-positioned to succeed in this rural-focused competition; having fewer pre-existing urban elites, they were also more likely to assert strong state control of artisanal production (often through imposing forced labour in state workshops) and to intervene (though less so) in commerce as well.

The Qin empire (221–206 B.C.E.) that emerged from this competition based itself on the mobilization of small rural households farming individual plots—and it tried to protect them from magnates, moneylenders, manipulative merchants, and natural disasters, if only to ensure that they were able to bear the burden of state demands. Their Han successors, facing the heavy fiscal pressures of long wars against the Xiongnu, followed broadly similar agricultural policies, while seeking tighter control of commerce and industry. Von Glahn characterizes this as a mercantilist fiscal state (p. 118): one that favoured an expansion of efficiency-promoting domestic trade (through road-building, attempts to standardize measures, and promotion of a stable currency) while attempting to gather as much as possible of the gain from that trade in its own hands. Here, too, then, policies designed to strengthen the state also promoted economic development.

Like most other scholars, von Glahn sees the latter part of the Han and the period of division that followed as mostly a time of economic stagnation or retrenchment. While important developments occurred in other areas—particularly the creation of a new military system based on what von Glahn calls "the Chinese-nomad synthesis," the Sui and Tang faced political-economic challenges that were in some ways analogous to those of the Qin and Han: in particular, a need to wrest power from local magnates and stabilize peasant subsistence while extracting enough wealth to support an expensive military establishment. The Tang wound up recreating the Han-period "division between revenue-generating regions in the Central Plain and the Yangzi River valley on one hand and the revenue-absorbing regions of the capital and the frontiers on the other" (p. 188). While the Sui and Tang did expand both the physical and the institutional infrastructure dedicated to stabilizing subsistence and mobilizing revenue for the frontier and capital—building transport canals and developing the first truly empire-wide system of emergency granaries—what the state refrained from doing was equally important: it did not try to impose the equal field system—which worked well enough in North China—on southern China, where it might well have inhibited the substantial investments needed to develop irrigated agriculture. Not only was no one set of institutions idea for all times, but different regions sometimes needed different institutions at the same time.

What proved revolutionary was the dramatically increased dependence of the central government on revenue from these southern territories during the late Tang and Song. This was largely a consequence of the An Lushan Rebellion in mid-Tang and the migrations it provoked away from a devastated north, but also required significant public investment in flood control, irrigation, and transportation. The south's superior agricultural possibilities and more abundant water transport made possible a much more diversified, commercialized, and productive economy, which the state tapped through an increased reliance on consumption taxes of various sorts. Technical change certainly mattered, but it was much more the result of applying existing knowledge to a richer resource base than of new inventions per se (p. 252): in emphasizing this, von Glahn departs from Mark Elvin's emphasis on a medieval "revolution" in science and technology,[3] and so is also freed of the necessity to explain why such a revolution petered out. He eschews another common "failure" narrative as well, making a convincing case that Northern and Southern Song tax demands—though certainly high—did not cause severe problems for the private economy (pp. 264–65).

We are thus left with two important revisions to many received narratives of politics, economy, and society in the Middle Empire. First, von Glahn strongly reinforces a point made many years ago in his co-edited book, *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, and anticipated well before that in some of Robert Hartwell's work: that in the richest parts of China, the economic story of the centuries from roughly 750–1350, or even 1550, is not one of spectacular periods of creativity

[3] Elvin, *Pattern of the Chinese Past*, pp. 113–30.

followed by stagnation or even collapse, but of relatively steady growth.[4] Even the Mongol conquest, so clearly disastrous for many regions in the North, and in Sichuan, seems to have done little to interrupt the gradual unfolding of technological diffusion, market development, and population growth in the East and Southeast (pp. 282–84, 286). Secondly—though more implicitly—von Glahn pushes back against a number of arguments, dating all the way back to the eleventh-century opponents of Wang Anshi 王安石, that blamed the Song for being too interventionist and too revenue-hungry in their approach to the economy, and thus eventually undermining their own socio-economic base. Even the desperate fiscal expedients adopted in the late 1250s to feed the army caused only temporary problems, he argues; and, conversely, the success of a new round of reforms, which shifted this burden to a relatively small number of wealthy areas, was not enough to save the dynasty. Instead of a neo-Confucian (or neoliberal) morality play, we get a simple tale of military defeat at the hands of enemies few others could hold off (pp. 277–78).

In extending what he calls "the heyday of the Jiangnan economy" all the way to 1550, von Glahn also doubts the narrative—most recently restated by William Guanglin Liu[5]—that sees early Ming attacks on the Jiangnan elite in particular, and the commercial economy in general, as having dealt the Chinese economy a devastating blow with very long-lasting consequences. While conceding at one point that "[Ming] Hongwu's [1368–1398] policies had a stifling effect on Jiangnan's market economy, a setback that took more than a century to overcome" (p. 294), he also points to various indicators that recovery may have been more rapid than that. He notes that Jiangnan's grain tribute was commuted to silver as early as 1436, and that Hongwu's project of making occupational statuses hereditary "largely collapsed over the course of the fifteenth century, which had the virtue of freeing up productive energies" (p. 289); he also points to evidence that an active land market had re-emerged in the Lower Yangzi in as early as the first decade of the 1400s (pp. 291–93). Despite the language quoted above, the impression one gets from von Glahn's brief treatment of this episode is that it did much less damage than Liu suggests; certainly there is no hint here that, as Liu believes, the Ming economy was still far short of the Song levels of per capita income even in 1550. In such a short space, von Glahn can do no more than suggest this contrary position; clearly, these are issues on which more research is needed.

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4 Paul Smith and Richard von Glahn, eds., *The Song-Yuan-Ming in Chinese History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003). See especially the Introduction and Chapter 1. See also Robert M. Hartwell, "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750–1550," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42, no. 2 (December 1982), pp. 365–442.

5 William Guanglin Liu, *The Chinese Market Economy, 1000–1500* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015).

Thus, the key feature of the post-1550 commercial expansion, as von Glahn sees it, was not so much recovery in China's economic heartland—that had largely happened earlier—but the increasing commercialization of other parts of the empire (p. 297). The remnants of bound labour largely vanished; commerce reached areas previously only barely touched by it (as indicated by a large increase in the number of periodic markets), and market-oriented rural handicrafts (especially cotton textile production) spread across a huge proportion of the empire. Corporate lineages, which shielded at least some assets from partible inheritance, became far more numerous, and new organizational forms spurred the urban economy, in both commerce and manufacturing. Massive imports of silver—first from Japan, later from Latin America—helped offset the generally unhelpful monetary policies of the Ming. However, Ming fiscal policy, still tied to the institutions established by Hongwu at the start of the dynasty, failed to capture much of this growth. This exacerbated the dynasty's vulnerability to both peasant uprisings spurred by bad climate and poor harvests through the Northern Hemisphere (p. 311), and invasion by the Manchus. The latter, as Nicola Di Cosmo has shown, did take advantage of the silver boom of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to build their nascent state,[6] even while the everyday lives of many Manchus remained less monetized than those of their Chinese contemporaries. Thus, Ming hostility to further commercialization and monetization slowed those processes, but did not stem them, and the Ming themselves wound up being victims of the developments in which they declined to participate.

Von Glahn refers to the Qing regime that the Manchus created as a "provisioning state" (p. 313), focused on stabilizing popular livelihoods. In that sense, they resembled the Ming, who preferred secure subsistence to potentially destabilizing growth; but Qing methods, which left far more initiative in private hands, were actually better for both subsistence security and growth, even as they further limited the state's power. Even at the peak of its military expansion, the Qing took a much lower share of GDP than its predecessors (or its early modern European contemporaries), and spent less of what it did take on the military.[7] While the

6 Nicola Di Cosmo, "The Manchu Conquest in World-Historical Perspective: A Note on Trade and Silver," *Journal of Central Eurasian Studies* 1 (December 2009), pp. 43–60.

7 On the very small share of Qing GDP taken by the state, see Wang Yeh-chien, *Land Taxation in Imperial China, 1750–1911* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 33; and Dwight H. Perkins, "Government as an Obstacle to Industrialization: The Case of Nineteenth-Century China," *Journal of Economic History* 27, no. 4 (December 1967), p. 492. For the share allocated to the military, see Zhou Yumin 周育民, *Wan Qing caizheng yu shehui bianqian* 晚清財政與社會變遷 (Late Qing fiscal administration and social change) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2000), pp. 36–38. For some European comparisons, see P.H.H. Vries,

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government did make significant investments in water control and famine relief—particularly in areas it perceived as fragile—and provide a reasonably stable monetary environment (at least through the eighteenth century), it delegated a great deal, especially in wealthier areas; von Glahn describes its village-level presence as "minimal" (p. 314). The resulting environment was conducive to what various scholars have called "Smithian growth": an expansion of private commercial activity, a deepening division of labour, and incremental increases in efficiency. China's population roughly tripled between 1680 and 1850, without a Malthusian crisis. But after a spurt of activism in the 1720s and 1730s, the state retreated from economic activism—and having chosen to freeze its revenues, in nominal terms, it increasingly lacked the resources with which to return to interventionism, even if it (eventually and half-heartedly) wished to.

One paragraph after noting this, von Glahn remarks, in summarizing the early and high Qing: "Yet the prosperity engendered by the quantitative growth in output masked the lack of significant innovation in productive technologies that would have lessened the pressure on increasingly scarce resources" (p. 347). And with that, he ushers in a very different narrative, of China's extremely troubled nineteenth century. This statement is hard to argue with, but its exact relationship to the preceding chapter is not entirely clear. Recalling his statement near the beginning of the book that contrasts the late imperial state with earlier versions that at least intermittently "galvanized economic growth" through investment in public goods and creating demand, as well as by providing conditions for Smithian growth, we can infer that he is suggesting some sort of link here between the state's retreat from activism and "the lack of significant innovation in productive technologies that would have lessened the pressure on increasingly scarce resources." However, he stops short of saying what these technologies might have been, or how the state might have made their invention more likely. While not providing any such hypotheses in a book that is already quite broad and lengthy is certainly understandable, it may leave some readers puzzled about a critical question to which von Glahn has led them quite effectively.

After a brief, useful summary of various assessments of overall Chinese economic performance *circa* 1800, von Glahn ends his book with a quick discussion of the nineteenth century. Here his survey is necessarily more selective, given the

(Note 7—*Continued*)

"Governing Growth: A Comparative Analysis of the Role of the State in the Rise of the West," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 97; and Philip T. Hoffman and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, "The Political Economy of Warfare and Taxation in Early Modern Europe: Historical Lessons for Economic Development," in John N. Drobak and John V. C. Nye, eds., *The Frontiers of the New Institutional Economics* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1997), p. 36.

huge literature on this period, but it is nonetheless valuable: his summary of the complicated and contentious literature on opium, silver, and alleged deflation in the early and mid-nineteenth century is particularly helpful. And his final emphases on the continued vitality of Chinese commercial networks, even in a period of crisis, and on the damage done by the indemnities imposed by foreign powers at the end of the nineteenth century are well-taken. The latter point also gives von Glahn one final chance to emphasize the economic costs of a weak state—particularly, but not solely, in the modern era.

As noted above, von Glahn avoids imposing an overarching thesis on this vast tableau. But along with his point about the need to go beyond an exclusive focus on the market in economic history, the book also makes an implicit case for a way of approaching China's pre-twentieth-century economic history. I am tempted to call this approach Braudelian, emphasizing as it does the geographic/material setting of regional economies, long slow processes of change rather than dramatic turning points, and sharp differences between the competitive markets of peasants, artisans, and petty traders on the one hand, and the world of big merchants, long-distance trade, and the shaping influence of fiscality and state-granted privilege on the other. And there is a tension, I think, between the book's emphasis on the potential and sometimes necessary creative role of the state—meaning the importance of policy decisions—and the implicitly *Annaliste*-approach structure of the narrative, in which even those state actions that may well have exerted a powerful economic stimulus (on the iron and porcelain industries, through the creation and maintenance of flood control, irrigation, and transport infrastructure, and so on) tend to be dealt with rather briefly. It would have been very valuable to see some discussions of exactly how the feedback loops between political choices, economic doctrines (which are also sketched briefly but effectively here), and the big, slow-moving structures central to this book are supposed to work; but perhaps that can only be done in the context of detailed accounts of particular cases, which a work like this cannot afford. And much as at least this reader might have like to see some such examples developed at length, one can hardly complain about their lacking in a book that already gives us so much.

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