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1

Elite Social Terrain and State Development

1.1 Not All Roads Lead to Rome

The state is the most powerful organization in human history. Since the formation of the first states in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, and the Yellow River around 4000 to 2000 BCE, the state as an organization has undergone numerous transformations in form and strength. It has become an institution we cannot live without.

Why did some states stay intact for centuries, while others fall relatively soon after they were founded? Why are some strong, and others weak? Why are some ruled by a democratically elected leader, and others by an autocrat? These are among the most time-honored questions that have produced generations of remarkable scholarship.

Yet, much of our understanding of how the state as an organization develops is based on how states evolved in Europe. The centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire laid the foundation for Europe's distinctive path of political development.¹ Political fragmentation led to competition and conflicts between states, creating a dual transformation.² On the one hand, rulers' weak bargaining power vis-à-vis domestic elites gave rise to the creation of representative institutions, which constrained executive power and enabled the ruler to tax effectively.³ On the other hand, frequent (and increasingly expensive) interstate conflicts advantaged large territorial states that centralized the bureaucracy and eliminated rival domestic organizations.⁴

The literature treats the European model as the benchmark and asks why states in other regions have failed to follow suit. Representative institutions, effective taxation, and what Max Weber calls a "monopoly over violence"⁵

have become universal criteria for evaluating states across the world. This convergence paradigm has also influenced policy makers. Many of the policy interventions carried out by the international community, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, focus on strengthening tax capacities and building “Weberian” states, in the hope that countries in the Global South will approach their European counterparts.⁶

For most of human history, the majority of the world’s population, however, has not been governed by a European-style state.⁷ Some non-European states have achieved incredible durability and effective governance by pursuing their own approach.

Clearly, not all roads lead to Rome. Rather than treating non-European states as underdeveloped cases that will eventually converge to the European model, we should take these durable and alternative patterns of state development seriously in their own right. Most developing countries have not created a rule based on consent, but are still run by autocrats. Even after a hard-fought process of national independence, the odds are that a developing country will not establish a European-style nation state. Sticking with the convergence paradigm is holding back evolution in the field of comparative political development and leading policy makers astray. It is time to recognize that there is more than one state development pattern, and to look for a new lens with which to analyze these new models.

1.2 Why China?

China represents an alternative—and incredibly durable—pattern of state development. Since its foundation around 200 BCE, Chinese imperial rule remained resilient for over two thousand years until its fall in the early twentieth century. Especially in the second millennium, a long-lasting equilibrium seems to have emerged. While many studies have lauded European rulers’ exceptionally long tenures thanks to the emergence of representative institutions, from 1000 to 1900 CE Chinese emperors on average stayed in power as long as European kings and queens. With the exception of the Yuan (1270–1368), every Chinese dynasty in the second millennium lasted for roughly three hundred years—longer than the United States has existed. Yet durability does not mean stability: dynasties eventually changed, rulers altered, rebellions erupted, and enemies invaded. But the pillar of imperial rule—a monarchy governing through an elite bureaucracy and in partnership with

kinship-based organizations—remained intact; the basic form in which the state was organized was exceptionally resilient.

While European states had become more durable and better able to achieve their main objectives by the modern era, the Chinese state seemed to have gained durability at the expense of state strength. Chinese emperors became increasingly secure, and the dynasties endured for longer. But the country's fiscal capacity gradually declined. In the eleventh century, for example, the Chinese state (under the Song Dynasty) taxed over 15 percent of its economy. This percentage dropped to almost 1 percent in the nineteenth century (under the Qing Dynasty).⁸

Exploring how the state maintained its durability *despite* declining strength, and what explains its eventual fall, helps broaden our understanding of alternative patterns of state development. China's different, but durable, patterns of state development demand a new approach that goes beyond simply testing Europe-generated theories in a non-European context, which has produced fruitful results, but not a new paradigm. The intellectual payoffs of departing from the Euro-centric approach are great if it enriches our repertoire of paradigms and approaches to the study of the state.

1.3 What Needs to Be Explained

A central puzzle that motivates this book is why short-lived emperors often ruled a strong state while long-lasting emperors governed a weak one. Previous scholarship has not provided a satisfactory answer.

A static origin story has dominated popular understandings of the Chinese state. Starting with Karl Marx, and popularized by Karl Wittfogel, this story features an "oriental state" that was formed to control floods and manage irrigation.⁹ According to this explanation, the Chinese state—a despotic monster—has been stuck in an inferior equilibrium from its inception. Headed by an autocratic monarch, and too centralized and too strong, the state squeezed the society for more than two thousand years until its eventual collapse: it was doomed to fail.

A similar static approach emphasizes political culture and ideology. Confucianism, which emerged during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and became institutionalized in the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), legitimized imperial rule and created China's "ultra-stable equilibrium structure" for two millennia.¹⁰ By treating two thousand years of Chinese history as a

single equilibrium, this cultural account vastly underestimates changes in the country's political structure.¹¹

Historians' earlier work, by contrast, examined China's political development through the lens of dynastic cycles. Dynastic cycle theory states that each dynasty usually started with strong leaders, but subsequent emperors' quality gradually deteriorated and lost the "Mandate of Heaven."¹² The peasants would then rebel, and the dynasty would decline and fall, and be replaced by a new one. According to this view, Chinese history can be explained by repetitions of recurring patterns. However, such an approach overlooks key features of these dynasties. In the second millennium, for example, ruler duration steadily lengthened, while fiscal revenue continuously declined, despite the rise and fall of dynasties.

Recent social science scholarship on China's state development has focused on either the beginning or the end—state formation during the Qin era (221–206 BCE) or state collapse during the Qing (1644–1911 CE). The scholars who study the beginning treat China's early state formation as a finite, complete process without examining how the state was sustained and how it changed over the next two millennia.¹³ The scholars who study the end focus on China's declining fiscal capacity without discussing the system's exceptional durability until the early twentieth century despite fiscal weakness, foreign invasions, and internal rebellions.¹⁴

It is time to account for the entire trajectory of China's state development and to consider these seemingly contradictory trends—longer ruler duration and declining fiscal revenues—not as paradoxes, but as interconnected manifestations of an underlying political equilibrium. Only when we take a holistic view can we start to explore the conditions that led to the emergence, durability, and fall of different political equilibria in China's political development.

In this book, I will explain *state development*, which I define as a dynamic process in which the state's *strength* and *form* evolve.¹⁵ A state's strength refers to its ability to achieve its official goals—particularly collecting revenue and mobilizing the population.¹⁶ State form is a product of two separate relationships. The first is between the ruler and the ruling elite: is the ruler *first among equals*, or does he or she *dominate* the ruling elite? The second relates to the relationship between the state and society—defined as a web of social groups: does the state *lead* or *partner with* social groups to provide basic services? While the first relationship concerns what Michael Mann calls despotic power, the second reflects the degree of infrastructural power.¹⁷

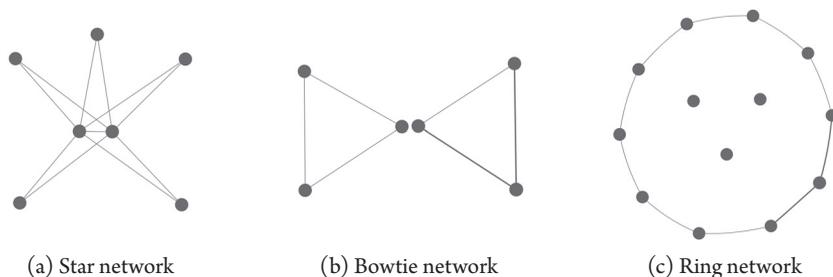


FIGURE 1.1: Three Ideal Types of Elite Social Terrain

1.4 My Argument

My overarching argument is that whether the state is strong or weak (state strength) and how it is structured (state form) follow from the network structure that characterizes state-society relations. Among various aspects of state-society relations, I emphasize *elite social terrain*: the ways in which central elites connect local social groups (and link to each other).¹⁸ When elites are in geographically broad and densely interconnected networks, they prefer a strong state capable of protecting their far-flung interests, and their cohesiveness constrains the ruler's power. When elites rely on local bases of power and are not tightly connected, they will instead seek to hollow out the central state from within and prefer to provide order and public goods locally; their internal divisions will enable the ruler to play competing factions against each other and establish absolute power. Elite social terrain, therefore, makes the state by creating a trade-off that the ruler must face: state strength and ruler duration are incompatible goals; one can be achieved only at the expense of the other.

1.4.1 *Elite Social Terrain*

Building on social network theories, I use three graphs in figure 1.1 to characterize three ideal types of elite social terrains.¹⁹ In each graph, the central nodes are state elites, defined as politicians who work in the central government and can influence government policies. The peripheral nodes represent local-level social groups. Each peripheral node represents a social group, such as a clan, in a specific geographic location. The edges denote connections, which can take multiple forms, such as membership in a clan, social ties, or family ties.²⁰

Central elites are agents of their connected social groups; their objective is to influence government policies to provide the best services to their groups at the lowest possible cost.²¹ Whether elites cooperate with each other or clash

over their preferred policies depends on the type of networks in which they are embedded.

The three networks vary along two key dimensions.²² First, the *vertical* dimension reflects the geographic scope of each elite's social relations: is he or she connected with social groups that are geographically dispersed or concentrated? Second, the *horizontal* dimension reflects the cohesiveness among the central elites: are they connected or disconnected?

In a *star network* (panel (a)), each central elite directly connects every social group located in different geographic areas. The central elites are also connected with each other: because elites link various social groups, their networks are likely to be overlapping, generating lateral ties between the elites. An approximate example of a star network is England after the Norman conquest. In 1066, a team of Norman aristocrats connected by (imaginary) kinship links conquered England and formed a coherent elite.²³ Although these elites had disagreements, they were all centrally oriented because they owned land and were embedded in social relations throughout the country.²⁴ Geographically dispersed social relations and internal cohesion are the defining features of the star network.

In a *bowtie network* (panel (b)), each central elite is connected to a set of social groups in a confined geographic area, but not to any groups in distant areas. Nor are the central elites connected with each other: because elites' social relations are localized, they are also less likely to be in each other's social networks. An example of a bowtie network is feudal France. In response to the chaos of the last years of the Carolingian Empire (800–888), the elites banded together in regional military alliances to protect themselves.²⁵ The French aristocrats were therefore "tribal," and each was attached to a certain locality.²⁶ Geographically concentrated social relations and internal divisions among the elites are the defining features of the bowtie network.

In a *ring network* (panel (c)), central elites are not connected with any social groups, or with each other. For example, in kingdoms in pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa, such as the Kongo, the Kuba, and the Lunda, the center struggled to control its periphery. Traditional leaders, often called chiefs, governed these peripheral regions and connected adjacent communities through kinship ties. These outlying territories could easily escape central control.²⁷ Disjunctures between state elites and social groups and internal divisions among elites are the defining features of the ring network.

The three forms of elite social terrains are archetypes; the reality is messier. The vertical dimension of elite social terrains (geographic dispersion vs.

concentration) conditions elite preferences regarding the ideal level of state strength, while the horizontal dimension (cohesion vs. division) conditions how the state is organized. Each ideal type produces a steady-state equilibrium of state-society relations; they vary in their durability and are powerful in describing and explaining a wide range of outcomes in China and beyond.²⁸

China's state development, for example, started as a star network, transitioned to a bowtie network, and ended as a ring network. The star network created a strong state but short-lived rulers. The bowtie network contributed to the country's exceptional durability but also undermined state strength. The ring network precluded state collapse.

Below I discuss how elite social terrains help us understand changes in state strength and form over the long run.

1.4.2 *State Strength*

Elite social terrain provides micro-founded insights about elite preferences regarding the ideal level of state strength. Each central elite is mainly interested in providing services to the social groups to which he or she is connected and not necessarily to the whole nation. Central elites can use a variety of governance structures to service their connected social groups. The most popular such structures are public-order institutions, such as the state, and private-order institutions, such as clans, tribes, or ethnic groups.²⁹ These structures provide services such as protection and justice, including defense against external and internal violence, insurance against weather shocks, justice in dispute resolution, and social policies that protect people from risks. Central elites embedded in the star network have the strongest incentive to use the state to provide these types of services to their connected social groups.

Two considerations drive elites' choices. The first is economic. In the star network, elites are connected to multiple social groups that are geographically dispersed. It is more efficient to rely on the central state to provide services because it enjoys economies of scale and scope.³⁰ With a strong central state, it is much cheaper to cover an additional territory in which a connected social group is located than to rely on the social group to provide its own security and justice. In the bowtie network, where elites only need to service a few groups in a relatively small area, private service provision is more efficient because the marginal costs of funding private institutions to service a small area are lower than the taxes that elites would be required to pay to support the central state. The ring network represents an extreme case in which central elites are

not connected to any social groups; they have lost control over society and cannot mobilize the necessary social resources to strengthen the state. Therefore, they choose to allow social groups to provide services through their own tribes, clans, or ethnic groups.

The second consideration that motivates elites' decisions is social. Tribes, clans, and ethnic groups that are concentrated in a certain locality often care a lot about their local interests but little about national matters. They oppose paying taxes to the central state, because the state will provide services to all parts of the country, and these specific social groups would end up paying for services to others. These geographically defined social groups hence create regional cleavages that produce distributive conflicts. Nevertheless, if central elites can connect multiple social groups that are geographically dispersed, as in a star network, this social network will cross-cut regional cleavages.³¹ These cross-cutting cleavages incentivize the central elites to aggregate the interests of multiple localities and groups and scale them up to the national level. The star network therefore transcends local interests and fosters a broad state-building coalition.³²

In the bowtie network, however, each central elite represents only a small number of localities. Social networks in this case *reinforce* existing regional cleavages. The central government then becomes an arena in which these elites compete to attract national resources to serve local interests.³³ Elites in the bowtie network would oppose strengthening the central state because such policies would divert resources from social groups to the state and weaken their local power bases. For example, during an eleventh-century state-strengthening reform in China's Northern Song Dynasty, opponents worried that creating a national standing army would threaten the power of "well-established local families," which controlled local private militias, and leave local communities powerless.³⁴ The ring network is an extreme case in which central elites pay no attention to regional cleavages and have no way of uniting different groups.

The elites embedded in these different types of networks follow patterns that are similar to those of what Mancur Olson describes as encompassing versus narrow interest groups.³⁵ Elites in the star network have an encompassing interest as they represent multiple groups in multiple locations. Cross-pressures arising from encompassing networks incentivize elites to form a coalition pursuing national, rather than sectarian, goals. Elites embedded in the star network prefer to strike a Hobbesian deal with the ruler to pay taxes in exchange for centralized protection. The central state, represented by the

ruler, provides an institutional commitment device between the elites and their groups. Supporting state building allows the elites to credibly commit to protecting their groups because it is harder for the central state, compared with private-order institutions, to exclude specific group members as beneficiaries from a distance. Those in the bowtie and ring networks become a narrow interest group.

In sum, the vertical dimension of elite social terrain that characterizes how central elites connect social groups conditions elite preferences regarding the ideal level of state strength. Their incentive to strengthen the central state weakens as we move from a star network to a ring network.

1.4.3 *State Form*

Network structures that characterize elite social terrains are also a principal factor that shapes how the state is structured and the development of state institutions. Elite social terrain shapes state institutions through two relationships: (1) between the ruler and the ruling elite and (2) between the state and society. This section discusses each relationship in turn.

RULER AND ELITES

In the relationship between *the ruler and the ruling elite*, the star network represents a centralized and coherent elite that can constrain the ruler in two ways. First, the elites are embedded in a centralized social structure in which they can use their cross-cutting ties to mobilize a wide range of social forces across regions. Second, the cooperative relations among the central elites in the star network make them a coherent group, which helps overcome collective action and coordination problems if they decide to rebel against the ruler. In this scenario, the ruler is only *first among equals* and is thus more likely to share power with the elites.

In the bowtie network, because central elites have regional bases of power, they can mobilize some (regionally based) social groups against the ruler. But it is easier for the ruler to quell challenges that are concentrated in certain areas. In addition, the lack of a dense network among the central elites provides what the sociologist Ronald Burt calls “structural holes” that allow the ruler to divide and conquer.³⁶ As Burt argues, if parts of a community are not directly connected with one another (i.e., structural holes separate them), an outside player can gain an advantage by playing the clusters against each other.

In this scenario, the ruler is more likely to establish absolute rule to *dominate* the elites.

Central elites' bargaining power is the weakest in the ring network since they cannot find allies within the society or coordinate among themselves against the ruler. The ruler's absolute power therefore reaches its zenith in this scenario.

STATE AND SOCIETY

In the relationship between *the state and society*, the star network represents the *direct rule of the state*. The ruler includes representatives from local groups in the national government in part to collect information about local societies and economies. With a centralized social network, the ruler can rely on central elites to collect revenue for the state and to mobilize the population. In this scenario, the state often takes a leading role in initiating and funding public goods provision, the most important of which include security, justice, and public works.

The bowtie network represents the *state-society partnership*. Central elites, embedded in local social relations, often compete for national resources to channel to their own localities. They prefer to allocate national resources and to outsource public goods provision to their own social groups. Connected social groups can seek rents from these projects and enhance their status within the local community. The result is often a partnership between the state and society in which the state delegates part of its functions, such as organizing defense and public works, to social groups. Social groups in this case would still depend on the state for resources and legitimacy, but would enjoy considerable autonomy.

The ring network is an example of what the historian Prasenjit Duara terms "state involution,"³⁷ in which the formal state depends on society to carry out many of its functions, but loses control over it. As the state descends further into involution, social groups replace it as the leader in local defense and public goods provision and threaten the state's monopoly over violence.

1.4.4 Three Equilibria

I argue that each of the three ideal types of elite social networks creates its own corresponding *steady-state equilibrium*.³⁸ For each network type, both sets of actors—the ruler and central elites—find it in their best interest, *absent an exogenous shock*, to maintain the current steady state.

The ruler faces a fundamental trade-off that I term *the sovereign's dilemma*: state strength versus personal survival. The ruler seeks to maximize state strength, which can best be achieved by facilitating the creation of a star network. But he also seeks to maintain his grip on power, which is easier if elites are fragmented, for instance if they are disconnected as in the bowtie or ring network. Depending on initial conditions, the ruler attempts either to strengthen the state or to maximize personal survival, but not both. A coherent elite helps the ruler strengthen the state, but threatens his survival.

Exogenous shocks, however, sometimes allow the ruler to reshape the elite social terrain to escape from the equilibrium of low survival to one of high survival, at the expense of state strength. The ruler survives by fragmenting the elite. A fragmented elite weakens the state, but must overcome insurmountable collective action and coordination problems to revolt against the ruler. Hence a fragmented elite structure undermines state infrastructural power, and contributes to despotic power.

In each type of network, the objective of the central elites is to economize the provision of services for their social groups. In the *star network*, elites seek to mobilize society to strengthen the state by, for example, contributing monetary and human resources to it. A strong central state provides efficient national coverage to protect their social groups if elites are linked in this way. In the *bowtie network*, however, elites prefer to delegate state functions to their social groups, which can provide the services privately at a much lower price than paying taxes to the national government. But the society in the bowtie network still has an interest in keeping the state “afloat.” A state with a moderate level of capacity can help protect society from existential threats, such as external invasions and large-scale natural disasters. In the *ring network*, the central elites can no longer use their ties to mobilize social groups, which are independent from the state. Rather than contributing resources to keep the state alive, social groups prefer to retain resources for themselves and start to play a leading role in local defense and public goods provision. The state in this equilibrium has minimal power to control society and is on the verge of collapse.

Table 1.1 summarizes the implications of the three equilibria for state strength and form.

The star network creates an equilibrium, which I label “State Strengthening under Oligarchy.” In this equilibrium, the ruler and the central elites jointly control the state in an oligarchy in which the ruler is first among equals. The elites can credibly threaten a revolt, which prevents the ruler from seizing absolute power. The elites in this equilibrium prefer a strong state because

TABLE 1.1: Three Steady-State Equilibria

Network	Equilibrium	State Strength	State Form		Example
			Ruler vs. Elite	State vs. Society	
Star	State Strengthening under Oligarchy	High	First among equals	Direct rule	Medieval China; England after the Norman Conquest
Bowtie	State Maintaining under Partnership	Moderate	Dominant	Partnership	Late imperial China before the Opium Wars; feudal France; sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America under colonial rule; the Islamic world during the Classical Period; the Ottoman Empire
Ring	State Weakening under Warlordism	Low	Dominant	State involution	Imperial China after the Opium Wars; sub-Saharan Africa in the pre-colonial era; part of the Middle East in the post-colonial era

they want to exploit its scale economies to offer services to their respective social groups. Private-order institutions are not desirable for the central elites in this case, because it is redundant for each geographic region to set up its own local defense and provide its own public goods. This equilibrium best characterizes medieval China during the Tang era (618–907) and England after the Norman Conquest (1066).

I call the bowtie network equilibrium “State Maintaining under Partnership.” In this equilibrium, the ruler uses a divide-and-conquer strategy to dominate a fragmented central elite and establish absolute power over this group. The elites choose not to threaten the ruler’s power because such collective action and coordination are too costly; they prefer a moderately strong state that can protect their social groups from existential threats. But they do not want the state to be strong enough to extract all resources from the society, since this would undermine their social groups’ efforts to establish private-order institutions. The ruler accepts this moderate level of state authority because further strengthening the state would require a more coherent elite, which would threaten his personal power and survival. The state outsources some of its functions to social groups, which partner with the state to provide public goods.

This equilibrium best describes late imperial China before the Opium Wars (tenth to mid-nineteenth century), feudal France (tenth to mid-fifteenth century), sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America under colonial rule (eighteenth to early twentieth century), the Islamic world during the Classical Period (seventh to twelfth century), and the Ottoman Empire (fourteenth to early twentieth century). In these cases, a central state assembled different social groups and relied on them to rule. These social groups included lineage organizations (in imperial China), feudal lords (in France), regional elites (in Latin America), and tribes or ethnic groups (in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East).³⁹

In the ring network's equilibrium, "State Weakening under Warlordism," the state, ruled by an autocratic leader, is too weak to control the society. Social groups therefore establish private-order institutions to provide security and justice. The state loses its monopoly over violence and is on the verge of collapse. This equilibrium approximates imperial China after the Opium Wars (mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century), sub-Saharan Africa in the pre-colonial era (pre-nineteenth century), and part of the Middle East in the post-colonial era (mid-twentieth century).⁴⁰

1.4.5 *Social Terrains Make the State, and Vice Versa*

The three equilibria are steady, and each steady state represents a unique equilibrium during a certain historical period. Exogenous shocks, however, can disrupt an existing equilibrium and provide opportunities for the state to reshape the society. I assume the ruler has a "first-mover advantage," which he can exploit to restructure the elite social terrain in his favor to ensure his own survival—even if this involves creating an elite network that jeopardizes state strength.

A polity can suffer from various exogenous shocks. Over the long term, the most important shock to dynasties is climate change, which leads to large-scale conflict. Here, I focus on two sorts of conflicts: external conflicts with foreign rivals, and internal conflicts during mass rebellions. Warm weather, for example, improves crop yields, making the territory a more attractive target for external attack. Greater yields should in turn reduce the likelihood of famine, making internal rebellion less appealing. Cold weather, by contrast, should decrease the odds of external attack by making the territory less valuable. It should also increase the threat of internal rebellion, since famine is more likely.

In the next chapter I demonstrate empirically that foreign rivals and the masses respond to exogenous climate shocks. When most external threats originate from the steppe nomads, and peasants live below the subsistence level, a climate shock can exogenously increase the odds of violence.

The violence induced by climate shocks provides an opportunity for the ruler to reshape the elite social terrain. Large-scale violence can destroy or weaken the old elite. If the old elite threatens the ruler's survival, he may take advantage of this power vacuum to recruit a new elite that is more fragmented and less threatening. A fragmented elite, however, will lead to declining state strength and a weak state. If large-scale violence erupts when the state is weak, the ruler may choose to relinquish the monopoly over violence and delegate the country's defense to social groups to quell rebellions. Such delegation, however, will empower society and create autonomous social groups that are independent from the state.

Social terrains make the state, and the state makes social terrains. While elite social terrains generate certain state development outcomes, the state led by the ruler can exploit exogenous shocks to reshape elite social terrains, facilitating transitions of equilibria.

A central theme of this book is that the Chinese ruler's pursuit of power and survival by reshaping the elite social terrain so that he could divide and conquer the elites created a great paradox in Chinese history: imperial rule endured, but the imperial state lost strength.

1.4.6 *Durability of Equilibria*

The three equilibria vary in their durability because some elite social terrains are more vulnerable to exogenous shocks than others. The star network is generally durable because the ruler can mobilize social resources through the central elites to cope with any challenges. But it is vulnerable to a particular type of violence: attacks on the center. If the central nodes are removed in a star network, the whole network will collapse. This type of network is prone to attacks on the center because centralized politics also funnels contentious politics to the center. When power comes from the center rather than the local level, people are more likely to direct their grievances toward the central government. This is consistent with a well-established relationship between political opportunity structure and contentious politics. Charles Tilly, for example, argues that the centralization and strengthening of the

State Strengthening under Oligarchy	State Maintaining under Partnership	State Weakening under Warlordism
7th to 10th Century	10th to Mid-19th Century	Mid-19th to Early 20th Century
Star Network	Bowtie Network	Ring Network
High State Strength	Medium State Strength	Low State Strength
Low Ruler Survival	High Ruler Survival	High Ruler Survival
Direct Rule	State-Society Partnership	State Involution
Medium Durability	High Durability	Low Durability

FIGURE 1.2: Summary of Argument

British state between 1758 and 1834 disseminated mass popular politics on “a national scale.”⁴¹ Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson term this the “mobilization effect of state centralization” in which a centralized state attracts mobilization against the center.⁴² The star network, therefore, produces a medium degree of durability, and is vulnerable to violence targeting the capital.

The bowtie is the most durable network structure. Because politics is compartmented, internal conflicts tend to be geographically concentrated. Rebel groups find it difficult to coordinate cross-regionally due to a lack of lateral ties. Even if an attack destroyed part of the network, such as half of the “bowtie,” the other half would remain intact. A foreign enemy may leverage domestic factionalism and play one bloc against another. This strategy, however, rarely works. A foreign ruler does not have the reputation established in repeated interactions to credibly commit *ex ante* to giving the defected faction the same power it currently enjoys. The bowtie network, therefore, produces a high degree of durability.

In the ring network, internal rebellions led by social groups are more likely to succeed in overthrowing the state, because the state cannot leverage state–society linkages to quell such rebellions or mobilize one part of the society against another. External attacks are also more likely to destroy a ring network for the same reason that the state is unable to mobilize sufficient resources for national defense. Although the ruler in a ring network is safe from elite coups because the central elites are disconnected and hence find it difficult to cooperate, a state built on a ring network is vulnerable to both internal mass rebellions and external invasions. The ring network, therefore, has low durability.

I summarize my arguments in figure 1.2. While the change from a star network to a bowtie network marks an important transition, the shift to a ring

network is often a prelude to state collapse. The crucial difference therefore lies between the star and bowtie networks on the one hand, where state elites are socially embedded, and the ring network on the other hand, where state elites are disconnected from society.

1.5 Intellectual Lineages

My argument is built on a long tradition of social science literature, but also advances it in significant ways. Modern social scientific studies of the state have followed three broadly defined traditions. The first, represented in pluralist, structural-functionalist and neo-Marxist approaches, takes a *society-centered* perspective and views the state as an arena in which different social groups and classes vie for power. The second tradition, best reflected in the movement to “bring the state back in,” takes a *state-centered* perspective and treats the state as an actor that is autonomous from society. The third tradition takes a *state-in-society* approach and views the state and society as competing forces. I discuss each tradition in turn and elaborate on how I advance their study.

1.5.1 Society-Centered Theories

After World War II, modern social sciences began shifting away from legal-formalist studies of constitutional principles in favor of more empirically focused investigations of human behavior. Society-centered approaches to explaining politics and government activities dominated the study of political science and sociology in the United States during this behavioral revolution in the 1950s and 1960s. These approaches treated government as an arena in which social and economic groups compete for power and influence. Scholars of this generation treated government decisions and public policies as the major outcomes of interest. Accordingly, they examined who participates in decision-making processes, how their “inputs” are translated into government “outputs,” and whose interests the government represents. Society-centered theories fall into three broad categories—pluralist, structural-functionalist, and neo-Marxist.

The pluralist tradition offers a group interpretation of politics. In a seminal contribution, Robert Dahl investigated how different groups participated in and influenced decision-making; he argued that power was dispersed among a number of groups that competed with each other.⁴³ In a theoretical synthesis,

David Truman provided a framework on how interest groups make certain claims upon both other groups and government institutions. He explicitly dismissed the idea that the state has a single, unified interest and viewed individuals belonging to the same groups as the fundamental actors in politics.⁴⁴

The structural-functionalist tradition employs a more macro-level analysis. Deeply rooted in sociology, adherents of this family of theories view society as a complex system that resembles a “body”; the various parts are like “organs.” Institutions exist to perform certain functions, and government institutions are parts of the system: each unit has its own role. Social and economic groups provide their inputs to the government, which then produces outputs.⁴⁵

Lastly, neo-Marxists view the state as an instrument of class domination. As the mode of production changes, the composition of (and power relations between) classes in a society evolve, and the dominant class uses the state apparatus to dominate the other classes and preserve its favored mode of production. Perry Anderson, in a grand tour of European historical development, argues that landed elites created and used the “absolutist state” to exploit the peasantry.⁴⁶ Applying a class-centered perspective to the international arena, Immanuel Wallerstein developed World Systems Theory, in which “core” countries are dominant capitalist countries that exploit “peripheral” countries for their labor and raw materials. Industries in peripheral countries remain underdeveloped because they are dependent on core countries for capital.⁴⁷

In all three theoretical perspectives, the state is not an independent actor: it is either an arena in which social groups compete (according to the pluralists), an organ that translates inputs into outputs (according to the structural-functionalist), or an instrument of class struggle that reflects the interests of the dominant class (according to the neo-Marxists).

1.5.2 *State-Centered Theories*

As the postwar era unfolded, society-centered perspectives increasingly failed to explain the social and political changes emerging in both developed and developing countries. Many developed countries continued pursuing their wartime Keynesian approach to macroeconomic management after the war ended.⁴⁸ They grew more independent of particular social influences and continued to increase public expenditures as the state became a main provider of welfare and services for multiple social classes.⁴⁹ Waves of independence produced scores of new states in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, which strived to shed their colonial pasts and build their own nation states.

Developed countries in Europe and North America began to face stiff competition from newly industrialized countries in East Asia, which relied on a “developmental state” to steer their economies.⁵⁰

In 1983, the New York–based Social Science Research Council established the Research Planning Committee on States and Social Structures. This committee was given the responsibility to “foster sustained collaborations among scholars from several disciplines who share in the growing interest in states as actors and as institutional structures.”⁵¹ Its first publication was a field-changing book—*Bringing the State Back In*.

In the book’s preface, Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol state that “Until recently, dominant theoretical paradigms in the comparative social sciences did not highlight states as organizational structures or as potentially autonomous actors.”⁵² In the introduction, Skocpol contends that states formulate and pursue goals that do not simply reflect the demands of social groups, classes, or society. States achieve autonomy when “organizationally coherent collectives of state officials” that are “insulated from ties to currently dominant socioeconomic interests” launch distinctive state strategies.⁵³

Once the state can be modeled as a coherent collective of officials, researchers can analyze it as a unitary actor. The rewards of such an approach are enormous. Otto Hintze put forward one of the most influential arguments in this camp, which Charles Tilly later popularized—the notion that interstate competition drives state building. It has since become a widely held belief that external war incentivizes state elites to develop a centralized fiscal system, a modern bureaucracy, and a standing army.⁵⁴ As Tilly succinctly summarized, “war made the state.”⁵⁵

This bellicist argument has set the agenda; much of the follow-up work has centered on how war (or its absence) has affected state building beyond Europe. For instance, scholars have applied the bellicist theory in Asia and indirectly proved Tilly’s argument using negative cases in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, where there were no (large-scale) wars and no state building.⁵⁶ Over time, much of the scholarship in this camp has evolved from a state-centered structuralist to a historical-institutionalist approach that emphasizes the importance of critical junctures and path dependence.⁵⁷

Another branch of this state-centered camp advocates an institutional approach that takes a rational choice perspective and focuses on state elites and their bargaining power vis-à-vis the ruler. Margaret Levi labeled the impulse behind this approach “bringing people back into the state.”⁵⁸ For

rationalist theorists, the agents who constitute the state, rather than the state itself, are the actors. This agency focus differentiates the rationalists from the structuralists, who concentrate on macro-level factors such as population, geography, and geopolitics.

In an influential study, Douglass North and Barry Weingast argue that England's Glorious Revolution established parliamentary sovereignty, which cemented the Crown's commitment to the elites, whose financial support was urgently needed to finance wars.⁵⁹ Robert Bates and Donald Lien examine how asset specificity conditions elites' bargaining power; they show that while taxing commerce produced early democracy in England, taxing land produced absolutism in France.⁶⁰ For Margaret Levi, the ruler is a revenue maximizer, but is constrained by bargaining power, transaction costs, and their time horizon.⁶¹

Bellicist and institutional accounts have both analyzed state building independently of society. Since state elites are autonomous from society, interstate relations and within-state bargaining ultimately determine how the state is organized—and how strong it is.

1.5.3 *State-in-Society Approach*

During the heyday of the state-centered approach, another group of scholars that studied the newly independent countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East observed that these states often struggled to establish authority in competition with strong social forces. These social forces—tribes, clans, or chiefdoms—were either a historical legacy or recently empowered by colonial regimes. Although these countries had established central governments with well-staffed bureaucracies in the capital, the centers often found it difficult to project their power to remote corners, where traditional authorities still dominated people's lives.

In a seminal book, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, Joel Migdal argues that many Third World states struggle to become the organization in society that effectively establishes the rules of behavior. According to his model of state-society relations, a state does not exist in isolation: it coexists with other social organizations, all of which strive to exercise social control by using a variety of sanctions, rewards, and symbols to induce people to follow certain rules or norms. These social organizations range from small family and neighborhood groups to mammoth foreign-owned companies. Strong states emerge only when “massive dislocation” weakens the social organizations.⁶²

The state-society approach has generated a fruitful literature. One strand of this literature examines how social forces constrain state power. Vivienne Shue argues that the Chinese imperial state's "reach" was limited by the rural "honeycomb" structure of gentry families.⁶³ Another strand of the literature investigates how incorporating social forces into the state shapes its goals and capacities. Elizabeth Perry, for example, shows that the Chinese state incorporated the working class into its leadership during the communist revolution, which influenced the state's goals after the founding of the People's Republic.⁶⁴ Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue further developed the state-in-society approach in an edited volume that showcases the approach's ability to explain a wide variety of phenomena in the developing world.⁶⁵ Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson recently built on the traditional state-society approach to model the state and society as competing actors that produce different scenarios in which the state becomes despotic, shackled, or absent.⁶⁶

1.5.4 *Situating the Argument*

My framework combines insights from state-society scholars who emphasize interactions between the two types of actors, borrows the pluralists' notion that society consists of competing groups, and builds on the rational choice approach's agency-centered microfoundations. However, my argument also diverges from traditional works in some respects. At the conceptual level, Max Weber defines the state in terms of its monopoly over violence.⁶⁷ I consider a state's monopoly to be a *choice* rather than a given: a state becomes a monopoly when both political elites and social groups choose it to be *the* provider of security. In this sense, Weber's definition of the state is only an ideal type. The boundary between the state and society is often blurred in practice; the state may partner with society to provide protection and justice. Similarly, in contrast to traditional state-society scholarship, I do not think society is necessarily in competition with the state.⁶⁸ A more useful conceptualization, following the sociologist Georg Simmel, is to view society as "a web of patterned interactions" that highlights its relational features, including its linkages to the state.⁶⁹

I build on Margaret Levi's notion that the ruler is a revenue maximizer, but add that he or she is also a *survival* maximizer.⁷⁰ Moreover, in non-European states that lack representative institutions, these two objectives compete against each other because they require different elite structures.

This capacity-survival trade-off—the sovereign’s dilemma—echoes what Barbara Geddes calls the “politician’s dilemma,” in which strengthening the state jeopardizes the ruler’s chances of survival.⁷¹

My focus on violence as a driving force for transitions in state development is inspired by the bellicist approach, which Otto Hintze and Charles Tilly first proposed and has been more recently articulated by Dan Slater and Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast.⁷² Robert Bates’ discussion of the tension between prosperity and violence in stateless societies and Avner Greif’s analysis of private-order institutions are especially helpful for thinking about the differences between state- and society-provided order.⁷³ However, I depart from this violence-centered literature in at least one crucial way. While previous works have found a straightforward association between war (external or internal) and state building,⁷⁴ I argue that how conflict shapes state development depends on *prior state-society linkages*. War may either strengthen or weaken the state, depending on the country’s elite social terrain.

As I describe it, China’s path toward state development is fundamentally different from that of Europe. Unlike Europe, where political order and economic development evolved at the same time, durability fostered economic and fiscal stagnation in China. My depiction thus challenges the linear progression of human societies found in various versions of classic modernization theory, which tend to be based on European case studies. Classic modernization theorists tend to believe all good things go together.⁷⁵ My discussion of the different paths of state development resonates with Perry Anderson’s and Barrington Moore’s observation that there are different paths of political development.⁷⁶ While Anderson and Moore emphasize the importance of social class, however, I focus on state-society linkages. I echo Samuel Huntington in pointing out that if there are no strong institutions, political order and economic success are often incompatible goals.⁷⁷

My account of China’s alternative patterns of state development parallels a large literature that examines the “Great Divergence” in economic development between China and Europe. Several important works seek to explain why Western Europe took off economically by the mid-eighteenth century, while China did not. These studies advance several explanations of why this may be, citing the roles of colonial exploitation and natural resources,⁷⁸ Atlantic trade,⁷⁹ domestic price conditions,⁸⁰ generalized morality,⁸¹ a culture of scientific inquiry,⁸² political fragmentation,⁸³ sovereign scope,⁸⁴ and mercantilist policy.⁸⁵ My argument does not explain China’s

economic development *per se*. But my exploration of its long-term state development, especially its declining fiscal capacity in the late imperial era, casts new light on China's economic downturn in the premodern era. My interpretation joins the spirit of the "California school," as articulated especially by Kenneth Pomeranz and Bin Wong, by pointing out that scholarship should branch out from Euro-centric perspectives and view China not as an aberration, but as an alternative—maybe a leading alternative—to the rise of Europe. However, while scholars in this school generally argue that China's economy declined in the eighteenth century,⁸⁶ some recent estimates show that the stagnation occurred much earlier—in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries.⁸⁷ My finding that China's state weakened during the Song-Ming times is consistent with this new evidence.

The state-society relations literature is the most relevant to my approach.⁸⁸ My proposed framework builds on the contention of these studies that state-society interactions are a fundamental driving force of political development. But rather than treating the state as a unitary actor (e.g., the ruler), I disaggregate its elements and emphasize ruler-elite relationships within the state. Departing from the assumption that the state and society are separate and competing entities, I emphasize the blurred boundary between the two and analyze how state-society linkages through elite networks drive state development.⁸⁹ While state-society scholars believe that traditional social organizations, such as kinship-based institutions, undermine state building, I argue that kinship networks, when geographically dispersed, align the incentives of self-interested elites in favor of state building. Therefore, the relationship between social forces and the state depends on the type of elite social terrain.

1.6 How Is It Done?

State development is a slow-moving process that requires an in-depth examination of history. This book starts with the seventh century—a critical era in which the Chinese state consolidated as a centralized, bureaucratic entity. This was roughly the same time that Europe started to fragment after the fall of the Roman Empire. I did not go back earlier, for example to the Qin and Han times, because we know less about the politics of these earlier dynasties beyond the official histories. The Chinese state was also in the early process of formation and did not establish a political equilibrium of internal spatial integration until the early seventh century.

I end in 1911, which marks the fall of the dynastic state, in order to maintain a temporal distance from the events and people I study. Examining a series of events that ended over a century ago allows me to disregard unnecessary details, place events and people within a longer time frame, and uncover previously undetectable patterns. As Hegel's maxim goes, "The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk."⁹⁰

My analysis is based on two methods. First, I use what Robert Bates, Avner Greif, Margaret Levi, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, and Barry Weingast call "analytic narratives" to provide an overarching description of the development of the Chinese state over a millennium.⁹¹ I rely heavily on historians' work and my own reading of the archival materials. Second, I have collected and compiled a large amount of original data for this book—most notably a dataset of all Chinese emperors, a longitudinal dataset of taxation from the seventh to the early twentieth century, a large geo-referenced dataset of over seven thousand military conflicts, a large geo-referenced dataset of over fifty thousand genealogical records compiled from 1005 to 2007 CE, and various biographical datasets that include information on major central elites and their marriage networks from the seventh century. Upon publication of this book, I will make all the data publicly available to facilitate future research.⁹²

I acknowledge that historical data are imperfect for many reasons. For example, some individuals and events were better documented than others; some documents have survived, while many were destroyed during wars; and even among those that have survived, some are better digitized than others. Mindful of these biases, I triangulate different sources of data and interpret my findings with caution. More importantly, I am transparent about how these biases could influence my conclusions. I use modern econometrics, with attention to causal inference, to analyze these data. I present the analyses and results in an accessible way in the main text, and relegate all technical details to the appendix.

While the historical discussions will provide a continuous narrative, the empirical analysis will focus on key moments of state making—such as fiscal reforms, military restructuring, and internal rebellions—to provide an in-depth examination of critical historical episodes.

1.7 A Roadmap

The book comprises nine chapters, which proceed chronologically. Together they probe the social foundations of China's long-term state development.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of China's state development. I draw attention to an important puzzle in Chinese history that motivates the rest of the book: short-lived emperors often ruled a strong state; long-lasting emperors governed with a weak state. Using analytic narratives and descriptive statistics, I present a bird's-eye view of China's fiscal and military institutions, external and internal warfare, elite structure, ruler duration, and development of social organizations over a millennium. My descriptive analysis demonstrates that the Chinese elites transitioned from an encompassing interest group with geographically dispersed social relations to a narrow interest group with localized social relations. The fragmentation and localization of elite social networks contributed to long durations of Chinese emperors but also weakened the imperial state.

Chapter 3 examines the State Strengthening under Oligarchy era during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). Tang China was governed by a national elite connected by dense marriage ties, which spread out across the entire country. This national social network incentivized the Tang elites to build a strong central state. The geography of the elites' social network facilitated China's rise as a superpower in the early medieval era. The empirical analysis in this chapter focuses on one of the most important fiscal reforms in historical China—the Two-Tax Reform—which influenced the structure of taxation over the next millennium. I conduct a social network analysis of 141 major politicians from the mid-Tang era (779–805), and show that the elites during this period formed a star-type network with a coherent center and ties reaching out to the periphery. This centralized elite network helps explain both the success of the fiscal reform and the short duration of Tang emperors. The star network also made the Tang state vulnerable to violent attacks on the center, which is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 4 studies the transition from the first to the second eras by focusing on the elite transformation from the Tang to the Song dynasties (960–1279). While Tang China was governed by a hereditary aristocracy connected by cross-regional marriage ties, a mass rebellion in the late ninth century induced by climate changes occupied the capitals and destroyed the aristocracy. The early Song emperors exploited this power vacuum and expanded the competitive civil service exam to prevent the formation of a new aristocracy, which led to the emergence of a new class of elites—the gentry. Using an original biographical dataset of over three thousand major politicians from throughout the Tang and Song eras, I show that elite social networks became increasingly local and fragmented. As a result, the post-Song elites created a bowtie-style

network. This elite transformation helps explain the change in ruler survival: Chinese emperors since the Song era became more secure and less threatened by the elites. The transformation also marked the beginning of a new era in Chinese political development in which the state partnered with society to govern, creating a durable equilibrium in the next millennium.

Chapter 5 discusses the early stage of the second era, State Maintaining under Partnership, by examining politics during the Song Dynasty (960–1276). I show that the Song emperors took advantage of a fragmented elite to concentrate monarchical power in the bureaucracy, which was staffed by the newly expanded civil service examination system. The empirical analysis focuses on an unsuccessful state-strengthening reform in the Northern Song Dynasty. In 1069, a Song politician—Wang Anshi—implemented a series of reforms to strengthen the state’s fiscal and military capacities. Politicians fiercely opposed these reforms and orchestrated their abolishment in 1085. I use tomb epitaphs to construct the kinship networks of 137 major politicians to analyze why some supported the reform while others opposed it. I show that the politicians who were recruited through the civil service exam were embedded in local marriage networks, which incentivized them to oppose the reforms in order to protect their local interests. By contrast, the politicians who inherited their positions were embedded in a national elite network, which incentivized them to support the reforms. The failure of state activism led to the development of social organizations, especially the lineages, which collaborated (and sometimes competed) with the state in local governance.

Chapter 6 investigates the consolidation of the second era during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). The founding Ming emperor fundamentally reorganized the bureaucracy to finally establish an absolute monarchy. Throughout the Ming era, the fragmented and locally oriented elites sought to maintain the status quo: they wanted to keep the state minimally functional, and opposed any attempts to strengthen it. Meanwhile, they built lineage organizations to consolidate their local power bases and negotiated with the state to protect their local interests. The empirical analysis in this chapter examines a critical fiscal reform—the Single Whip—which provides a useful lens through which to analyze the behavior of the Ming elites. I show that politicians with localized kinship networks—the majority of Ming-era politicians—represented local interests and influenced central policy making to protect their kin’s economic interests and autonomy. The empirical analysis draws on an original biographical dataset of 503 major officials under Emperor Shenzong (1572–1620) and historical data on local implementation of the Single Whip reform. I

demonstrate that the more national-level politicians a prefecture produced, the slower its adoption of the Single Whip, if it was adopted at all.

Chapter 7 assesses another aspect of State Maintaining under Partnership by analyzing how private-order institutions emerged in the late imperial era. I first show that Chinese elites invented private-order institutions—lineage organizations and lineage coalitions—which helped them overcome commitment problems in a weak state in three ways. First, by worshipping a common ancestor, lineage organizations spiritually bonded people who belonged to the same descent group. Second, by compiling genealogy books, lineage organizations could reward well-behaved members and exclude free-riders. Third, through intermarriages, lineage coalitions helped exchange “mutual hostages” between lineages. I then support these arguments using an original dataset of historical conflicts, civil service examination success, and lineage organizations identified from genealogical records. The development of private-order institutions and their partnership with the state help explain China’s durable political order in the late imperial era, despite a weakening state and frequent challenges from foreign invaders and internal rebels.

Chapter 8 examines the transition from the second era to the third—State Weakening under Warlordism. The early Qing period was characterized by an unusually high degree of centralization for late imperial China. Emperors during the High Qing era in the eighteenth century enforced policies to diminish the power and privileges of the gentry, simplified tax collection by merging land and labor taxes, and delineated central and local revenues. The early Qing emperors were state builders, but they strengthened the central state by circumventing the civil bureaucracy. With the deterioration of the Eight Banners (a state army) and the Manchus’ increasing corruption and ineptitude, however, later Qing rulers increasingly relied on the civil bureaucracy, which was staffed by members of the narrowly interested gentry. The Qing Dynasty could not escape the inevitable fate of fiscal and military decline that its predecessors had experienced. The Western intrusion in the mid-nineteenth century led to an unprecedented financial crisis in the Qing Dynasty. The effects of cold weather exacerbated by droughts triggered the Taiping Rebellion. Qing emperors, focused on ensuring their personal survival, delegated local defense to gentry leaders. Using data on the locations of rebellions and lineage activities, I show that internal rebellions significantly increased lineage collective action and tilted the balance of power from the imperial state to local society. The abolishment of the civil service examinations further cut the ties between the state and society, and created a state that was disconnected

from an increasingly autonomous society. I show that the counties that experienced more post-rebellion lineage collective action were more likely to declare independence from the Qing government in 1911.

Chapter 9 concludes by discussing the broader implications of the findings for our understanding of the developing world. My China-based theory resonates with state-building experiences observed in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, and generates an important lesson: state weakness is a social problem that cannot be resolved with a bureaucratic solution. State-building projects should extend beyond a narrow focus on reforming the bureaucracy to include efforts to make incentives related to the social structure compatible with a strong state. China's imperial state development and its legacies also help us understand the challenges of modern state building. One of the secrets to the Communist Party's success in state building was the transformation of Chinese society through a social revolution, which paved the way for the formation of a modern Chinese state.

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