

Agricultural Revolution and Elite Reproduction in Qing China: The Transition to Capitalism Debate Revisited

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Recent actor-centric theory about the historical rise of capitalism emphasizes the role of the autonomous agrarian elite in fostering a sustained agricultural revolution. This revolution generated ample agrarian surplus, in the form of rural elite's elevated income, to fuel a capitalist-industrial takeoff in late-eighteenth-century England. The nontransition to capitalism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China, despite the vast surplus generated in its advanced agrarian sector, shows that high agricultural productivity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a capitalist takeoff. By comparing Qing China with eighteenth-century England, where capitalist industrialization erupted spontaneously, and nineteenth-century Japan, where capitalist industrialization succeeded under intensive state sponsorship, this article argues that a strong urban entrepreneurial elite, capable of centralizing the agrarian surplus and investing it in productive industrial innovation, were as important as the existence of the surplus itself in fomenting capitalist transition. The reproduction of the elite in eighteenth-century China was constrained, not by the anticommercial "oriental despotic" state as presumed in earlier literature, but by the state's paternalist disposition in managing urban class conflict. Capitalist-industrial development in China was further impeded in the nineteenth century, when a nexus of local predatory-military elite emerged in response to millenarian uprisings and wasted most of the agrarian surplus in their accumulation of means of violence. The negative case of China helps us advance the actor-centric model of capitalist transition by bringing urban entrepreneurs and class politics back in.

Why industrial capitalism, defined as an economic system based on private ownership of means of production and self-sustained, self-transforming growth, emerged in

late-eighteenth-century Europe but not in other places is a question that has puzzled generations of sociologists since Marx and Weber.¹ Since the 1970s, the most prevalent theories of capitalist

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¹ Some theories trace the genesis of capitalism to different historical periods and highlight different aspects of capitalism as its defining characteristics (e.g., international division of labor or institution of private property), creating much broader conceptions of capitalism. These theories help us under-

transition have focused on the countryside. They try to identify the special conditions underlying the great leap in agricultural productivity and the subsequent generation of ample agrarian surplus that fueled the spontaneous capitalist-industrial takeoff in eighteenth-century England and state-led industrialization in nineteenth-century Japan (e.g., Brenner 1985; Collins 1997; Smith 1959; Wallerstein 1974; Wrigley 1985).² While some theories explain this agricultural revolution in terms of such actor-less structural processes as growth in international trade or a shift in demographic patterns, recent theories adopt a more delicate actor-centric approach. This approach highlights the role of contingent interactions among different elites and classes in the making of the agricultural revolution (Brenner 1985; Emigh 1997b, 2003, 2005; Lachmann 2000).

Both actor-less and actor-centric explanations of capitalist transition, however, are challenged by new discoveries about China's high agricultural productivity, which compare favorably with England in the early modern period of 1600 to 1800 (Li 1998; Pomeranz 2000; Wong 1997). These new findings create a conundrum: If China's agricultural productivity on the eve of the nineteenth century was as high as England's, why did its substantial agrarian surplus not fuel a capitalist transition? In this regard, China is an interesting negative case, a thorough investigation of which could refine or revise existing theories of capitalist transition (for a discussion of negative case method, see Emigh 1997a; Skocpol 1979; cf. Ragin 1987).

stand the deep historical root of modernity. To explain the great socioeconomic transformations since the nineteenth century, though, the narrow and classic definition of capitalism that I adopt here is still the most pertinent.

² Agrarian surplus is defined here as agriculture's total output less the minimal amount of output necessary for the subsistence of the agrarian population. It usually takes the form of extra monetary income of the dominant rural population in a commercialized economy. As Goldstone (2003:34) notes, the early modern agricultural revolution "did not mean more food per head for society as a whole—it simply meant greater returns for the fraction of population which dominated agriculture; in Britain the landowners and large farm-tenants, in China the peasant farming households" (cf. Clark 1999).

I argue that these theories, while focusing on how substantial surplus was produced in the agrarian sector as a necessary condition for a capitalist-industrial takeoff, pay insufficient attention to how this surplus was distributed. By extending the actor-centric approach, I contend that the key reason for China's nontransition to capitalism, despite its agrarian wealth, lies in its lack of a strong urban entrepreneurial elite capable of concentrating the agrarian surplus and investing it in industrial innovation.³ Rather than invalidating the existing theories, the inconvenient new findings show that these theories have not yet exhausted all necessary conditions leading to capitalism.

In the second part of the article, I explore why a strong urban entrepreneurial elite did not emerge in Qing China (1644 to 1911). I argue that this nonemergence is a consequence of the paternalist disposition of the Confucianist state. Though the Qing state supported commercial interests during ordinary times, it tended to be biased toward the lower classes when it came to managing urban class conflicts amid subsistence crises. The case of China's nontransition to capitalism helps us advance the actor-centric theory of capitalist transition by bringing urban entrepreneurs and class politics back in.

ACTOR-CENTRIC EXPLANATIONS OF CAPITALISM'S AGRARIAN ORIGINS

Most classical sociological theories about Europe's transition to capitalism stipulate that the key to such transition is how and why a group of urban bourgeoisie managed to break away from the feudal order to become an autonomous, and then dominant, social group

³ Against some historians' suggestions that China should be compared with the whole of Europe rather than individual European countries (e.g., Pomeranz 2000), I insist on using nation-states as units of comparison. Though it may be reasonable to compare China and Europe as two integrated economies, it is more sensible to compare China, England, and Japan, for example, as individual political economies characterized by distinct political constellations. This comparative strategy is particularly apposite provided that most independent variables identified by different theories of transition, such as pattern of state formation, class conflict, and elite conflict, are political processes played out in the national arena.

(Marx [1848] 1972; Weber 1930, 1958; cf. Hilton 1978). Although they emphasize different aspects that fostered a distinct and intact community of entrepreneurs—the role of dynamic class struggle, medieval urban institutions, or Protestant asceticism—they all agree on the urban origins of modern capitalism.

These urban-origin theories are overshadowed in postwar social sciences by the “agrarian origins” school. According to this school, the urban-centric explanation failed to account for the timing and location of capitalist breakthrough: Why did the transition not take place in medieval northern Italy, when mercantile activities and long-distance commerce based in city-states were most vibrant? Why did the transition not occur until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in England? This agrarian school sees industrial capitalism as first and foremost the result of England’s early modern agricultural revolution. The revolution not only freed up a large amount of labor ready to be absorbed by expanding industries, but it also generated large agrarian surplus in the form of the rural elite’s elevated income, which then flowed to the urban-industrial sector to fuel the industrial revolution.

Some explain the agricultural revolution in terms of macrostructural trends, such as the shift in demographic regime that released Europe’s agriculture from the grip of the Malthusian cycle (Postan and Hatcher 1985). Others attribute it to the rise of a core-periphery division of labor across Europe that enabled core nations to make a sustained investment in improving productive technology (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Wallerstein 1974; cf. Arrighi 1995; Mielants 2007).

These actor-less theories offer us invaluable insights about the long-term, large-scale historical contexts that made the agricultural revolution possible. They have been criticized, though, for paying insufficient attention to how the conflictual interaction among historical actors determined the time and place of the revolution. For Brenner (1985), English peasant resistance in the medieval period permanently ended the system of serfdom, forcing the landowning class to resort to less coercive forms of exploitation such as fixed monetary rent. At the same time, the peasants were not strong enough to stop the landlords from consolidating their absolute property rights through

enclosure. The landlords attained economy of scale by expanding their landholdings and depriving the peasants of their right to subsistence. Consequently, the incessant investment by entrepreneurial landlords or large tenants in farming technology resulted in the agricultural revolution.

More recently, Lachmann (2000) finds that Brenner’s class-actor-based theory contradicts many empirical nuances of European development. He develops an elite conflict theory to provide an alternative agrarian-origin and actor-centric account of capitalist transition. Defining “elite” as a group of rulers who command the capacity to appropriate resources from nonelites and inhabit a distinct organizational apparatus, he argues that early modern England’s agricultural revolution was an unintended consequence of the rise of a private property regime, which the landowning gentry elite established as a means to fend off the claim on agrarian surplus by rival elites from the state and the church.

Advancing the actor-centric approach, Emigh (1997b, 2003, 2005; Hopcroft and Emigh 2000), through her study of late medieval Tuscany as a negative case of capitalist transition, illustrates that sustained growth in agricultural productivity was possible only under certain urban-rural relations that allowed autonomous agricultural development. Tuscany’s resourceful landowners, mostly urban industrialists and merchants who regarded their agricultural investments as secondary to their urban ones, fostered an agricultural revolution under sharecropping tenure. At the same time, they impeded the autonomous development of agriculture by instituting an urban domination of rural interests. With the subjugation of the rural to the urban sector, Tuscany’s agricultural revolution failed to sustain itself. Agricultural productivity stopped growing when Florence’s industrial-commercial sector declined in the beginning of the early modern era. This was in contrast to England’s lasting agricultural revolution under the auspices of autonomous rural gentry.

Besides pinpointing the significance of rural-urban relations in the capitalist transition process, Emigh also finds that agricultural revolution is not necessarily associated with large-scale commercial farms based on fixed-rent leasing, as most Marxist or neo-institutionalist

theories presume, but it can develop from small or medium farms based on other types of tenure as well (Emigh 1999; see also Allen 1992).

Though Lachmann and Emigh do not find class politics to be particularly important in fostering or restricting capitalist transition, we still cannot rule out the possibility that there exist some cases in which class politics does matter. Brenner's, Lachmann's, and Emigh's versions of the actor-centric approach, which emphasize class conflict, elite conflict, and urban-rural relations, respectively, are not logically incommensurable. To combine their insights, we can postulate that to explain a case of capitalist transition or nontransition, one must identify the key historical actors whose actions unintentionally caused the transition or nontransition in question. We can then explain their actions in terms of the specific contour of class conflicts (as emphasized by Brenner), pattern of interelite conflicts (Lachmann), and urban-rural sectoral relations (Emigh) in which these actions were embedded (cf. Adams 2005; Hopcroft 1994).

BRINGING THE URBAN ENTREPRENEURIAL ELITE BACK IN

THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH ABOUT EARLY MODERN CHINA

Studies of capitalist transition in Japan and the nontransition in China have been heavily influenced by the agrarian-origin theories of Europe's transition. For example, many studies explain Japan's successful capitalist-industrial takeoff in the nineteenth century in terms of an agricultural revolution in the Tokugawa period (1603 to 1867). They find that the endogenous forces that can lead to capitalist takeoff were ripe by the time the imperialist intrusion forced the Japanese state, in a struggle for survival, to promote capitalist industrialization from above (Collins 1997; Smith 1959). The most prevalent theories about China's nontransition to capitalism are equally influenced by the agrarian-origin school. For example, the "agricultural involution" thesis suggests that unchecked demographic growth, which provided early modern China with an abundant supply of zero-cost labor, led to diminished per capita agricultural productivity and a lack of incentive to innovate labor-saving technology (Huang 1985, 1990; cf.

Elvin 1973). With a stagnant or even deteriorating agrarian sector, a capitalist-industrial takeoff was simply out of the question.

New evidence about China's early modern economy challenges this agrarian-origin approach. According to these new findings, early modern China did in fact witness an impressive agricultural revolution. China's integration with the early modern global economy led to a massive influx of American silver, which European merchants used to purchase such Chinese products as silk, ceramics, and tea. It precipitated a sweeping commercialization of the economy, leading to the dissolution of the agrarian-coercive order based on manorial estates and the rise of a peasant economy grounded in free alienation and transaction of land and labor (Buoye 2000; Jing 1982; Rowe 1998, 2002; von Glahn 1996). China's integration with the global economy also induced the growth of an interregional division of labor, under which core areas (such as the Lower Yangzi Delta) specialized in high-value-added products, such as cotton and silk textiles, and imported most of their food from peripheral areas specializing in grain production (Hung 2001; Li 1998; Marks 1998; Wong 1997).

Continuous innovations in farm management and production technologies by free peasant producers, in addition to practices that checked population growth (such as infanticide), enabled long-term growth in agricultural productivity, rural income, and peasants' standard of living in the empire's economic core (Lee and Campbell 1997; Lee and Wang 2000; Li 1998). In the most advanced region, net return on peasants' labor increased by 20 to 50 percent from 1600 to 1750, and this entailed "highly impressive gains for peasant households who enjoyed high incomes and apparently voluntary leisure" (Goldstone 2003:29). The socioeconomic indicators in Table 1 show that China was not behind England at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Despite this homegrown agricultural revolution, industrial capitalism did not emerge spontaneously in eighteenth-century China (in contrast to England), nor did it take root under the government's conscious promotion in the nineteenth century (in contrast to Japan). These inconvenient findings unsettled the agrarian-origin school and triggered a new wave of schol-

Table 1. Select Indicators of Economic Performance and Living Standard in Early Modern China and England

	Land productivity ^a (kcal/hectare)	Labor productivity ^a (kcal/day)	Average rural family income ^b (cal per man-day worked by family)	Average nutrient intake ^c (cal per adult male per day)	Average life expectancy ^d (expected life at birth)
China	10,250	34,202	10,567	2,651	39.6
England	1,557	36,478	9,961	2,000 to 3,300	32 to 34

^a Data based on English Midlands and Yangzi Delta, circa 1800 (Allen 2002: Table 1).

^b Data based on agricultural laborers' income in England's Midlands and peasants' income in the Yangzi Delta, circa 1800 (Allen 2002: 13).

^c Data based on nineteenth-century England and nineteenth-century China (Pomeranz 2000: 39).

^d Data based on mid-eighteenth-century England and select economically advanced regions in mid-eighteenth-century China (Pomeranz 2000: 36–37).

arship to look for a different explanation of industrial-capitalist transition.⁴

TOWARD A NEW EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK FOR CAPITALIST TRANSITION

Of the new explanations, Pomeranz's (2000) ecological argument attracts the most attention. He asserts that the divergence of developmental pattern between England and China did not occur until the turn of the nineteenth century. Before that, both economies were experiencing parallel growth in commerce, population, and agricultural productivity. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, development in both regions reached the limit that the available and diminishing ecological resources, such as timber and cultivable land, could allow. Chinese development was trapped, but England successfully circumvented the ecological constraint and leaped forward to industrial revolution. The single most important endowment that allowed England to overcome this constraint was its access to vast American resources.

This explanation is neat, but it is problematic in three ways. First, it cannot explain why England did not capitalize sooner on its easy access to American resources to foster capitalist-industrial development. Second, England's access to American resources vis-à-vis their unavailability to China is an exaggeration. American resources in eighteenth-century England were far from inexpensive. Many of these resources were in fact sold to England at higher-than-average world-market prices (Vries 2001). With a huge silver reserve originating from several centuries of trade surplus, it would not have been difficult for China to purchase New World resources from the world market if the need arose (see Goldstone 2004: 279). Third, Japan also initially had no access to American resources, but it industrialized successfully in the nineteenth century through purchasing most of its essential raw materials from the world market (Howe 1996: 90–137).

Another popular explanation is the chronic war thesis (Arrighi 2007: 309–50; Braudel 1992; North 1994; Wong 1997). It stipulates that the international rivalry in early modern Europe urged European states to ally with the mercantile elite, who financed government war efforts and thrived under state protection. This argument about the relation between war-making activities and capitalist-industrial takeoff is too convincing to deny. It says little, though, about why similar chronic war conditions in other places and times, such as Japan in medieval times and Southeast Asia in early modern times, did not lead to capitalist takeoff.

⁴ There are studies that illustrate the existence of vibrant proto-industries in villages in early modern China, resembling the proto-industrialization found in early modern Europe and Japan (Li 2000). Their existence, though, does not rule out the question of why concentrated urban industries based on continuous technological innovation have not emerged in China. In fact, their existence makes China's nontransition even more puzzling.

Moreover, emphasizing the positive effect of war on capital accumulation, this thesis neglects war's devastating effect on accumulated surplus and gains in productivity. Often, the positive and negative impacts of war simply cancelled out each other, not providing much advantage to economic development (Vries 2002). We still have the problem of discerning under what circumstances the positive effects of war would outweigh its negative effects.

The rise of industrial capitalism, which occurred in a unique place in a unique time in world history, must be the result of a contingent concatenation of multiple factors (Collins 1980). Though one cannot deny the contribution of each of the above factors to the rise of capitalism, Table 2 clearly shows that these factors, taken either individually or collectively, cannot adequately explain the capitalist transition in eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century Japan, nor China's nontransition throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A "factor X" must be missing. To sufficiently explain the variation in the developmental pattern of England, China, and Japan, this factor X must manifest a positive value in eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century Japan, but a negative value in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China. While most of the revisionist explanations of China's nontransition reviewed above ground their analysis in actor-less structural constellations (e.g., isolation from American resources or lack of interstate rivalry), I will borrow insights from the actor-centric approach to look for any crucial actors essential to capitalist takeoff that were missing in early modern China—"the factor X."

Recently, Goldstone (2000, 2002, 2004) has developed an "engineering culture" theory to explain the China-England divergence. It stipulates that the key to England's capitalist-industrial takeoff was the popularization of a unique Newtonian worldview and engineering culture that enabled entrepreneurs to turn preexisting scientific knowledge into practical improvement of commercial ventures. Goldstone (2001) argues that the initial rise and survival of this culture in seventeenth-century English academies resulted from a series of historical accidents. But how did this engineering culture diffuse outside the scientific community and become entrenched in the world of industrial production? Who were the actors responsible for this diffusion?

A hint to these questions can be found in Allen's (1983) theory of "collective invention." According to this theory, application of abstract scientific knowledge to innovative practical use during the industrial revolution required recurrent and costly experimentation by capital-intensive firms and mutual diffusion of the subsequent knowledge among these firms. The significance of resourceful entrepreneurs in fostering the industrial revolution is also noted, though in passing, by Lachmann (2000: 199-203), who finds that England's agricultural revolution and the subsequent increase in the incomes of landowners and tenant farmers did not automatically trigger industrialization. An intermediate step of a "forced draught," which centralized the elevated rural income into the hands of urban entrepreneurs, was necessary to turn the agricultural revolution's gains into the fuel for industrial investments and innovations that finally triggered a "spontaneous combustion"—the industrial revolution. This transfer of

Table 2. Conditions Leading to Capitalist Takeoff According to Major Transition Theories

	Sustained Agricultural Revolution	Control of New World Resources	Interstate Conflict	"Factor X"	Capitalist Takeoff
Tuscany, 14-15C	No	No	Yes	Yes/No	No
England, 18C	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
China, 18C	Yes	No	No	No	No
China, 19C	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Japan, 18C	Yes	No	No	No	No
Japan, 19C	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes

Note: Factor X denotes a necessary condition missed in existing literature.

Table 3. Synthetic Theory on the Dynamics of Capitalist Takeoff

	Surplus Production: Sustained Agricultural Revolution	Surplus Concentration: Strong Urban Entrepreneurial Elite	Result: Capitalist-Industrial Takeoff
Tuscany, 14–15C	No	Yes	No
England, 18C	Yes	Yes	Yes
China, 18C	Yes	No	No
China, 19C	Yes	No	No
Japan, 18C	Yes	No	No
Japan, 19C	Yes	Yes	Yes

income from the rural to urban sector can be carried out via various routes, such as rural gentry's investment in urban companies or commercial exchange between urban entrepreneurs and rural landowners or tenants, with the terms of trade favoring the former.

In other words, collective invention, or diffusion of an engineering culture into the production process, is impossible without a critical mass of vibrant entrepreneurs capable of appropriating the elevated income of the rural elite and using this concentrated surplus to execute the costly trial-and-error development of productive technology. In England, many of the first-generation industrial entrepreneurs were far from self-made men; rather, they were the offspring of long-established entrepreneurial families. They relied on their families' accumulated wealth and networks for their initial fortunes (Brenner 1993:51–91; Crouzet 1985; Grassby 2001; Rose 2000).

In Japan, nineteenth-century industrialization hinged on the government's success in levying heavy agricultural taxes to finance the rise of Western-style industrial entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs were instrumental to the importation of the engineering culture during the Meiji reform, in contrast to the Chinese government's futile attempt to do so (Goldstone 2000; Hamilton 1999; Ma 2004; Westney 1987). Viewed in this light, a strong urban entrepreneurial elite (strong in the sense they were free from harms done by other elite or nonelite actors and had access to extensive resources necessary for their activities), capable of reaping the agrarian surplus and channeling it to industrial innovation, should be the factor X, manifesting positive values for eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century Japan, but a negative

value for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China.

Bringing the urban entrepreneurial elite, who are taken for granted by most agrarian-school theorists, back into the picture does not mean simply going back to the classical urban-origin school of capitalist transition. The existence of an established entrepreneurial elite alone could never bring about capitalism in the absence of a large agrarian surplus ready to be centralized in their hands. As we saw in fifteenth-century Tuscany, the dominance of an urban elite under an urban-rural linkage that was unfavorable toward autonomous rural development obviated sustained growth in agricultural productivity. In Tuscany, the combination of a strong urban entrepreneurial elite and lack of a lasting agricultural revolution did not generate a transition to capitalism. Therefore, *both* abundant agrarian surplus, in the form of elevated rural income, and a strong urban entrepreneurial elite capable of funneling this income are necessary for a capitalist-industrial takeoff. This synthetic approach is shown in Table 3.

Establishing the presence of a strong urban entrepreneurial elite as the factor X leads us to another question: Why did an entrepreneurial elite not attain a dominant position in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China, in contrast to their powerful counterparts in eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century Japan? As the traditional "oriental despotism" thesis presupposing the imperial state's constant repression of commercial interests no longer stands up to evidence (Hung 2003; see also the discussion in the next section), an alternative explanation is needed. In the following, I borrow insights from the actor-centric perspective of capitalist transition, together with Adams's (2005) analysis of how the reproduction strate-

gies of elite families shaped state formation and commercial development in early modern Europe, to explicate the reproduction trajectory of the entrepreneurial elite in Qing China.⁵

ELITE REPRODUCTION IN QING CHINA

In the following, we shall see that the state elite were symbiotic with the rural gentry elite, and both worked tenaciously to increase agricultural productivity in early modern China. We shall also see that an urban entrepreneurial elite did emerge, and they maintained cozy relations with the state and gentry elite. Yet despite the support from other elite groups, increasing profitability in commerce, and increasing respect for mercantile activities in the dominant culture, many entrepreneurial families paradoxically opted to shift away from commerce over generations to become gentry and officials, limiting the long-term growth in the size and power of urban entrepreneurs as an elite group.

SYMBIOSIS OF STATE ELITE AND GENTRY ELITE

The state elite and rural gentry elite constituted two major elite groups in Qing China. After securing their rule over China in the mid-seventeenth century, the Manchu emperor immediately stripped the Manchu noblemen of their autonomous political power and reestablished a centralized bureaucracy that was more rationalized than those of earlier dynasties (Marsh 2000; Wakeman 1985; Zelin 1984). The state elite was made up of bureaucrats appointed by the emperor, mostly high-level degree holders emerging from the meritocratic imperial examination (Elman 2000; Ho 1962). The gentry elite were lower-level degree holders not eligible for bureaucratic posts. They usually stayed in their home areas and served as informal and hegemonic leaders in local communities (Jing 1982).⁶

⁵ Throughout the discussion, I define "elite reproduction" as a process in which a certain group of elite maintain and expand their size and power over generations.

⁶ In the analysis, I adopt Ch'u's (1962) definition of gentry elite as those who obtained an imperial degree but did not have a bureaucratic career.

The gentry elite, who enjoyed tax privileges on their landed property and could therefore easily expand their holdings, became the dominant landholders, living on fixed rents collected from tenants. During the eighteenth century, lay landlords, who held no imperial degree and thus no gentry status, increased in number and occupied an ever larger proportion of the landholding class. Most lay landlords owned small tracts of land, and they depended on the local gentry for communications with the government and many other services such as rent collection. Many even registered their land under the name of local gentry to partially enjoy the tax privileges. They were therefore in a subsidiary position and never constituted a major elite group (Brook 1990; Li and Jiang 2005).

The state and gentry elite were generally collegial and intertwined, similar in their ideological outlook and linked by kinship or other social ties. Local bureaucracies, usually understaffed, heavily relied on the collaboration of local gentry for a wide range of affairs, such as arbitration of disputes and tax collection. In return, the gentry secured a share of the local government's revenue as remuneration for their services, on top of their tax privileges (Chang 1962:43–73, 197; Ch'u 1962).

In early modern England, interelite conflict over rights to agrarian surplus led to the institutionalization of private property, which fomented the agricultural revolution (Lachmann 2000), but symbiosis between state and gentry elites in Qing China was at least as effective in raising agricultural productivity. According to the Confucianist orthodoxy upheld by the Qing state, both officials and gentry leaders should exercise paternalist, benevolent leadership and cater to their subjects' well being, just as a patriarch should take care of his children (Hamilton 1990; Wong 1997). The central government based bureaucratic promotions on local officials' performance in maintaining stability and enhancing local welfare. And local gentry derived their influence and reputation from their good deeds for the local community. These two elite groups were therefore eager to join hands in constructing and maintaining local infrastructures such as irrigation systems, dikes, transportation routes, and granaries. They also enthusiastically promoted new techniques in agricultural and handicraft production. These efforts were key in improving agricultural pro-

ductivity and living standards in mid-Qing China (Li 1998; Rowe 1998, 2001, 2002; Will 1990).

THE LIMITED EMERGENCE OF AN URBAN ENTREPRENEURIAL ELITE

Besides these two major elite groups, a nascent group of entrepreneurial elite also emerged in concert with the rapid commercialization of the economy. These elites normally operated in merchant groups bounded by native-place identities and shared dialects. Built upon the webs of native-place associations, these merchants constructed extensive commercial networks to conduct their highly profitable long-distance trade and finance, facilitating the circulation of grains, salt, textiles, and credits across the empire (Hamilton 2006). The most common origins of these mercantile elite were lay peasants or landlords who diverted their savings to commerce (Ye 1980).

In contrast to the traditional view that the Qing government was always hostile to mercantile activities and eager to curb commercial growth because of the Confucianist loathing of commerce, recent studies converge on the view that “the Qing seems perhaps the most pro-commercial regime in imperial Chinese history” (Rowe 1998:185). By the eighteenth century, the tenet that in addition to agriculture, “industry and commerce are also the pillars of the world” (*gongshang yiwei ben*), as well as the extensive legal protection of merchants’ property rights (*ye*) against official abuses and other menaces, had replaced the anticommmercial variant of Confucianism as the dominant ideology among the state and gentry elites (Rowe 2001; von Glahn 1996; Zelin, Ocko, and Gardella 2004). In the 1720s, a pivotal decade for the centralization of the Qing state (Zelin 1984), the emperor declared in an edict that “gentry, peasants, workers, and merchants, though having different occupations, are all children of the family, and they should be treated equally” (cited in Shen 2007:85). This favorable disposition toward commerce is consistent with the bureaucracy’s increasing dependence on private merchants in securing local grain supplies, completing infrastructure projects, and procuring logistical supplies for military campaigns (Perdue 2005; Rowe 1998). Many officials and rural gentry families saw commerce as an

opportunity to diversify their sources of income. Covert or open investment from these elite families constituted a large portion of the operating capital of many successful urban commercial ventures in Qing times (Pomeranz 1997).

As the state and gentry elites supported, or even overlapped with, the emergent entrepreneurial elite, one would expect the latter to expand continuously and coalesce with the former two to constitute a three-way symbiotic, interpenetrating, and mutually strengthening elite formation, comparable to the patrimonial merchants–landlords–officials nexus found in many European countries in early modern times (Adams 2005; Emigh 2003; Lachmann 2000). In reality, though, the reproduction of the entrepreneurial elite was severely limited, and they never became a major, independent elite group on equal footing with the other two.

Throughout Qing times, a number of conspicuous merchant groups monopolized the most profitable business sectors. The most outstanding case was the Anhui merchant group, which originated in Anhui province and thrived on the production of and trade in salt, textiles, tea, and other items in the economically advanced metropolises along the Yangzi River, such as Yangzhou, Suzhou, and Hankou. They always operated their businesses under the blessing of state officials, who were happy to see their contribution to the stable supply of consumer goods and to benefit from their taxes and bribes. Despite the prominence of these merchant groups, they were mostly no more than decentralized networks of individual merchant families that rose and fell successively. These families rarely thrived over generations. Usually, a successful entrepreneurial family, after accumulating sufficient initial fortune, pulled out from commerce and turned themselves into gentry or state elite through investing their wealth in preparing their younger generations for imperial examination (Hamilton 2006; Wang 1996).

This pattern of reproduction of China’s merchant families is exemplified by the Pan family, one of the wealthiest Anhui merchant families in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a member of the Anhui merchant group, the Pans thrived in the seventeenth century in the salt and condiment trade. In the late seventeenth century, they resettled from their native place in Anhui to Suzhou, the wealthiest city in early

modern China, to expand their business. After the resettlement, the family started shifting their resources from commercial investment to education. They established schools and hired prestigious literati to educate their children. By the late eighteenth century, only one minor household in the extended family was left in the family business, which had already shrunk substantially. All other Pans obtained different levels of imperial degrees and became the leading gentry and state elite in the Suzhou area. Some even became high-rank officials in the central government. Their political power was so overwhelming that their mercantile origin was eventually nearly forgotten (Xu 2004).⁷ The same pattern of reproduction can be found among the wealthiest Anhui salt merchant families based in Yangzhou (Ho 1954; see also Wang 1996). In eighteenth-century Hankou, the Anhui merchant families pooled their financial resources to found a nationally known academy dedicated to preparing their offspring for the imperial examination (Li 2002).

With this recurrent departure of the most successful merchants, capital accumulation and further expansion of the merchant networks were limited, though the sustenance of the network at large was guaranteed by the continuous entry of new members from modest backgrounds. This stands in contrast with the powerful merchant families that grew over generations in early modern Europe, and to a lesser extent in Tokugawa Japan. In late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England, many of the early industrialists came from established entrepreneurial families, with the Darby family in iron industry as the best example (Braudel 1992; Brenner 1993:51–91; Crouzet 1985; Grassby 2001; Rose 2000:66–79).

While many prominent mercantile elites in China chose to reproduce their elite status through quitting commerce and transforming themselves into gentry and state elite, gentry and

state elite who attempted to capitalize on the empire's expanding commerce by engaging in private entrepreneurial activities never let these activities become their main source of income. Chang's (1962:197) classic study shows that income from commercial activities constituted only about 20 percent of the total income of the nonofficial gentry class in the late nineteenth century, a period when China was already closely connected with the world capitalist system and the imperial-examination system was considerably weakened. This figure must have been much lower in the eighteenth century.

Successful entrepreneurial families' high propensity to transform themselves into gentry and state elite, together with gentry and state elite's relatively low propensity to transform themselves into entrepreneurs, limited the growth of the entrepreneurial elite's size and power. As a result, Qing's commercial economy was marked by "weak firms in strong networks," as compared with the "firm-based economy" grounded on enterprises operated by business dynasties in eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century Japan (Hamilton 1999:16–25; Reddings 1991). With the lack of a strong entrepreneurial elite accumulating financial and organizational capacity over generations, China was short of an agent competent in centralizing the abundant agrarian surplus and diverting this surplus to costly and risky productive innovation.

As the state and gentry elite in Qing China were in fact favorable to commerce, and the anticommmercial variant of Confucianist ideology among the elite had been replaced by a pro-commercial variant in Qing times, it is puzzling why the entrepreneurial elite did not grow into a strong group in Qing China. To find a satisfactory explanation for this paradox, we need to look beyond the realm of interelite politics. We shall see that the answer lies in the peculiar class politics of Qing China.

CHINA'S CLASS POLITICS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Influenced by the Confucianist conviction of benevolent rule and paternalist protection of the weak, the Qing state was lenient toward tenant peasants and actively protected their livelihood against "rich but not benevolent" landlords (*weifū buren*), just like a loving father protects

⁷ Case studies show that some merchant families did continue their family businesses after their shift to bureaucratic careers. But they usually became more hesitant and reticent about their commercial involvement when they climbed higher up in the bureaucracy. Moreover, most of these studies are based on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sources, which do not tell us much about earlier periods (see Pomeranz 1997; Zelin 2005).

younger siblings from the bullying of the older ones (Brenner and Isett 2002; Gao 2005). The Qing state showed the same paternalist disposition when handling urban class conflict. The cases below illustrate how the Qing state managed urban class conflicts involving Anhui entrepreneurial elite in Suzhou and Hankou, two vibrant commercial centers in the Lower Yangzi and Mid Yangzi regions. The class politics constituted a milieu—or habitus (Bourdieu 1977)—that shaped the entrepreneurial elite’s strategy of social reproduction. A focus on this habitus helps us make sense of the elite group’s preference to prepare their later generations for gentry and bureaucratic rather than mercantile careers.

URBAN CLASS CONFLICTS AND STATE PATERNALISM IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Anhui businessmen controlled the major cotton textile workshops operating in the city of Suzhou. They were highly profitable, as Suzhou’s textile industry commanded a colossal share of the empirewide textile market (Fan 1998; Li 2000). The industry was plagued, though, by recurrent conflicts between factory owners and workers (Yuan 1979). After several instances of large-scale labor unrest in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the local government became more interventionist in resolving labor disputes. In adjudicating these disputes, government officials frequently invoked the metaphor of landlord–tenant relations. The workers’ duty of timely submission of finished products to the owners was compared to tenants’ duty of punctual rent payment. At the same time, local officials often reminded workshop owners of their obligation to provide stable employment to their workers, just as rural landlords should protect their tenants’ tenure and never expel them at will. When conflict seemed imminent, the local government attempted to preempt the outbreak of labor unrest by urging workshop owners to make concessions, such as raising wages and shortening the work day (Chiu 2002).

Under a neo-institutionalist perspective, this conflict-containment strategy unintentionally increased the transaction cost that workshop owners would have to bear had they attempted to attain economy of scale by hiring lots of

workers. This heightened cost created a constraining environment that discouraged workshop owners from expanding their businesses into large-scale factory production. It gave them no choice but to depend on a decentralized putting-out system for most of the production process, despite the existence of favorable conditions for large-scale manufacturing, including available technology, abundant labor power, and an empirewide mass market for Suzhou textiles (Chiu 2002; Xu 1999; cf. Li 2000).

The Qing government’s paternalistic and accommodating approach to labor unrest stood in sharp contrast with the eighteenth-century English state, which was ever more aggressive in aiding the nascent industrial entrepreneurs through repressing labor unrest, though it tended to stand by the rural gentry in their conflict with the urban bourgeoisie. Hobsbawm (1952:66–67) notes that “as the [eighteenth] century progressed, the voice of the manufacturer increasingly became the voice of government,” and state support enabled the “innovating entrepreneur . . . [to] succeed in imposing himself” despite “the bulk of public opinion against him.” Since the mid-eighteenth century, the state had helped early industrial capitalists enforce labor discipline by penalizing workers who refused to work the long hours their employers requested and by regularly raiding workers’ homes to look for evidence of embezzlement (Mann 1993:92–136; Marglin 1974).

The Qing state’s handling of a large-scale riot against Anhui merchants in Hankou in 1740 further epitomizes its paternalistic sympathy for the underprivileged. Encountering a salt shortage in many parts of the Hubei province in early 1740, the provincial governor adopted a merchant-friendly policy that encouraged Anhui salt merchants in Hankou to export part of their abundant stock to the neighboring regions hit hardest by the shortage. This should have both stabilized salt prices in those regions and enhanced the traders’ profits. The traders’ exporting activity also pushed up local salt prices in Hankou and unleashed a riot. Thousands of angry citizens encircled and smashed major salt houses in the city. They held a number of leading merchants hostage and forced them to sell their stocks locally and at lower prices. Despite the scale of the disorder, the government ordered no suppression or arrests. The emperor, in an edict about how to

pacify the rioters, simply referred to them as “stupid people” (*yumin*) who “were not patient enough to wait for the proper handling of the situation by the authority” (*bu jingting banli*). He instructed local officials to console the angry citizens and to make them “content with their lots” (*gean benfen*), and to urge the merchants to lower their sale price, so that “both the merchants and the people could get a fair deal” (*liangde qiping*). The final investigation report from the central government did not blame the rioters for the incident but did blame the merchant-friendly provincial governor for his incompetence. After demoting the governor, the central government devised a series of measures to lower salt prices and cut merchants’ profit margins as a means to prevent future conflicts (QSL-QL *juan* 117:7, 117:20–21, 118:6–7, 120:28, 122:16–7, 123:5–7, 137:15–6).

The Qing government’s handling of the Hankou salt riot is emblematic of its commitment to protecting the lower class’s right to subsistence during acute food crises. Similar food riots, in which people looted local food traders’ grain stocks or forced them to sell their stocks at lower prices, became recurrent nuisances of city life during the eighteenth century (Wong 1997). In better times, the Qing government often rewarded merchants’ contributions to securing the food supply through favorable measures such as low commercial taxes and low-interest government loans, but in the midst of a food crisis, the government never hesitated to persuade or press local grain merchants to sell their stocks at discounted prices. Grain merchants sometimes protested against these price control measures, but mostly in futility (QSL-QL *juan* 193:13–4, 273:26–8; see also Dunstan 2006; Hung 2004; KYQ; QSL-QL *juan* 314:25–6, 314:31–3, 315:7–8, 1282:2–5; Rowe 2001).

Food crises and riots were not limited to China. They also proliferated in eighteenth-century England in the context of rapid commercialization of the food supply and demographic expansion (Thompson 1971). English authorities’ handling of the food crises, however, diverged significantly from the experience in China. In the early eighteenth century, local English governments, like the Qing state, were sympathetic to the rioters. They often urged merchants to lower food prices to soothe angry citizens. As commercialization of the

food supply and centralization of the state advanced during the century, however, the central government increasingly marginalized paternalist local authorities and repressed food riots to defend merchants’ “legitimate rights” in making a profit at the expense of people’s right to subsistence (Thompson 1971; Wong 1997:222–27; cf. Tilly 1975).

The urban entrepreneurial elite in eighteenth-century England benefited from the *absolute* and *unconditional* support of the state, which shielded them against resistance from below. This support was justified by the increasingly dominant ideology of classical political economy (Perleman 2000; Somers and Block 2005). This ideology conceptualized the unrestrained free market as a natural order and claimed that the state was obliged to defend this order by protecting entrepreneurs.

The entrepreneurial elite in eighteenth-century China, on the other hand, enjoyed only *relative* and *conditional* support from the state. It is true that the Qing state elite never saw the mercantile elite as their antinomies and were diligent in facilitating their businesses and helping them secure property rights in merchant–merchant or merchant–official disputes (Zelin et al. 2004). When it came to managing conflict between entrepreneurial profits and subsistence of the poor during a crisis, however, the state elite often favored the latter at the expense of the former. Considering that the Confucianist state viewed merchants and other commoners as children who deserved equal grace from the state—the metaphorical patriarch—state protection of the poor from the excess of merchants’ profiteering activities was tantamount to the paternalist protection of a younger sibling from a bullying older one. In light of the insecurity that the contentious lower class caused the mercantile elite, and the lack of political protection against this insecurity, the entrepreneurial elite’s propensity to transform themselves into gentry or state elite over generations becomes more comprehensible.

MILLENARIAN REBELLION AND MILITARY-PREDATORY ELITE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Urban entrepreneurs’ insecurity, caused by popular contentions and the lack of state protection, only worsened in the nineteenth century, when

the Qing empire witnessed a deepening socio-economic crisis and a fiscal crisis of the state, aggravated by China's successive wars with imperial powers since the 1840s. Besides intermittent urban riots, the nineteenth century also witnessed a tide of more protracted and violent heterodox religious uprisings. These uprisings were mostly inspired by the White Lotus religion, which originated around 1100 C.E. and prophesized the total destruction of the corrupt world and the coming of a utopian one. White Lotus sects, despite assiduous repression by the Qing state, never ceased growing in the eighteenth century. They expanded rapidly by recruiting the swelling rank of landless vagrants displaced by commercialization and demographic pressure (Harrell and Perry 1982; Kuhn and Jones 1978).

Sporadic religious rebellions were usually put down swiftly. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, however, the frequency, scale, and intensity of these uprisings escalated when the Qing state's capacity for maintaining social order declined. Heterodox uprisings culminated in the White Lotus Rebellion of 1796 to 1805, which heralded a century of recurrent large-scale rebellions, with the Taiping Rebellion of 1851 to 1864 being the most disruptive (Hung 2005; Kuhn 1978). These rebellions further constrained the reproduction of the entrepreneurial elite, both directly and indirectly. The sectarian rebels, with a strong egalitarian impulse, earnestly confiscated accumulated wealth and executed the rich. The intense battles between the imperial army and the rebels always interrupted local commercial and agricultural activities, destroying much of the surplus generated in the agrarian economy.

The indirect impact of these rebellions on mercantile activities was equally devastating and more endemic. Finding the large, corrupt, and immobile imperial army not reliable in the eradication of heterodox rebels during the White Lotus Rebellion, the Qing state opened a Pandora's box of local militarization, encouraging gentry elite to collaborate with bureaucrats to organize local militias. Amid growing social disorder, these militias proliferated in all corners of the empire during the nineteenth century. In the midst of the Taiping Rebellion, many merged to become larger and more formal military structures, leading to the rise of

provincial armies autonomous from the imperial center (Kuhn 1970).

Short on financial support from the central government, these military organizations financed themselves by levying heavy special taxes on local commercial centers and agricultural producers (Kuhn 1970:87–92; Mann 1987). Gentry elite, the main agents of local militarization, reaped handsome profits from the process, as they usually appropriated 20 to 30 percent of all funds raised for military purposes as their remuneration. Militia operations had become the single most important source of their government-service income by the late nineteenth century (Chang 1962:69–73). Even some merchant families got on this lucrative bandwagon and abandoned their original businesses to turn themselves into militia organizers (McCord 1990). In sum, the militarization process entailed the transformation of part of the gentry, state, and mercantile elite into a nexus of military-predatory elite.

The protection offered by the military-predatory elite did not match the extraordinary tax burden they imposed on the entrepreneurial elite, who were already suffering from financial losses incurred by the upheaval itself. The Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, was a dramatic turning point that portended the demise of the Anhui merchant network. The battles, fought mostly in the Mid Yangzi and Lower Yangzi areas where their businesses were concentrated, physically annihilated many prominent Anhui merchant families. Many who survived went broke as a result of the heavy tax burden they were forced to bear to finance counter-insurgency campaigns, in addition to the decade-long disruption of their businesses (Ye 1982; Zhou 1996).

While nineteenth-century China still lacked a vibrant entrepreneurial elite capable of concentrating the agrarian surplus to foster a capitalist-industrial takeoff, the new military-predatory elite siphoned vast surpluses (if they had not yet been destroyed by the rebellion) off the economy, not for productive investment, but for the accumulation of means of violence. In the 1860s, the Qing state initiated a top-down industrialization program to nurture an array of state-sponsored industrial enterprises in the wake of a series of humiliating defeats by Western industrial powers. This industrialization effort was hampered, though, by the ever-

expanding nexus of military-predatory elite, who consumed a large portion of the economic surplus that could otherwise be mobilized by the central government to finance the growth of new industrial firms.⁸ It is not surprising that this industrialization program ended in a spectacular failure. At most, it achieved nothing more than creating a few isolated “pockets of growth” scattered across the empire (Perkins 1967; Wang 2003; Wright 1981).

Comparing the capitalist-industrial takeoff in nineteenth-century Japan and China’s retrogression to an agrarian-coercive order is telling. In the early nineteenth century, the advantages and limitations of Japan’s economy were similar to, if not worse than, China’s situation. Subsequent to the agricultural revolution in the Tokugawa period, the Japanese economy was rife with an agrarian surplus decentralized among peasant cultivators (Collins 1997; Smith 1959; cf. Rozman 1973). Japan was not short on resourceful mercantile elite, but they were far from securely dominant. They were also checked, at least in part, by a growing popular contention from below as the commercialization process increasingly jeopardized commoners’ subsistence (Vlastos 1986:92–141). After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, however, the energetic Meiji reformers successfully built a highly centralized state that effectively and brutally repressed all kinds of popular contention, clearing the path for the entrepreneurial elite (Bix 1986:189–214). They managed to centralize vast economic resources into their hands through heavy agricultural taxes. Meiji reformers used these concentrated resources to construct infrastructure, ranging from railroads to telegraph systems, necessary for industrial growth. They also channeled a substantial portion of the revenue to finance the development of large, vertically integrated, private corporate conglomerates known as *zaibatsu*, with Mitsubishi and Mitsui as well-known examples

⁸ This can be illustrated by *lijin*, a new tax imposed on almost all commercial transactions after the 1850s. Instead of going all the way up to the central government, the collected *lijin* was used mostly by local governments to finance local militarization, among other ends. In the end, it did not bring many new resources to the modernizers in the central government (Mann 1987).

(Hamilton 1999; Howe 1996; Smith 1959; Westney 1987).

This pro-capitalist, centralized political structure, which was effective in concentrating and using the substantial agrarian surplus to jumpstart a capitalist-industrial takeoff, was simply nonexistent in nineteenth-century China. While the expanding military-predatory networks in China eroded the state’s financial capacity and thwarted its effort to cultivate a vital and self-expanding urban entrepreneurial elite, a formidable, state-sponsored strata of corporate elite took shape in Meiji Japan, laying the groundwork for Japan’s capitalist expansion in the century to come.

DISCUSSION

In eighteenth-century China, the imperial state became increasingly favorable to and even dependent on commerce, in contrast to the obsolete thesis of oriental despotism. At the same time, the imperial state was not particularly predisposed to harshly suppressing popular contention against entrepreneurial activities. It often sympathized with the underprivileged during class conflicts, particularly in the midst of subsistence crises. The resulting insecurity among the entrepreneurial elite induced them to invest much of their financial resources to prepare their offspring for bureaucratic or gentry careers instead of mercantile careers. This severely constricted the social reproduction of the urban entrepreneurial elite. In eighteenth-century England, on the contrary, the centralizing state actively shielded the urban entrepreneurial elite against resistance from below. Under the absolute protection of the state, the secure and empowered entrepreneurial elite grew in size and power, and they became increasingly confident in employing their financial resources to experiment with new productive technology.

In nineteenth-century China, the imperial state faltered and millenarian uprisings proliferated. Confronted with such disorder, the local state, gentry, and merchant elite collaborated to build local militias and levied extra taxes on agricultural and commercial activities, turning themselves into a nexus of military-predatory elite. The subsequent vicious circle of coercion and rebellion led to the annihilation of a substantial rural surplus and the diversion of the remaining surplus to the accumulation of means

of violence. Not much surplus was left for the state to mobilize during the state-led industrialization program in the late nineteenth century, which ended in a spectacular failure. Early nineteenth-century Japan, like China in the same period, did not have a strong urban entrepreneurial class to start with. Following the Meiji Restoration of the 1860s, though, the powerful and centralizing Meiji state managed to engineer the rise of such an elite by imposing heavy agricultural taxes. They channeled this centralized income from the rural sector to finance the growth of private and Western-style corporations. The Meiji state was equally effective in containing any popular resistance to this process. By the turn of the twentieth century, Japan had emerged as a major capitalist-industrial power in the world.

The contributions of this study of Qing China to the theory of capitalist transition are threefold. First, it urges us to bring the urban entrepreneurial elite back in. Most prevalent theories of capitalist transition emphasize the significance of England's and Japan's early modern agricultural revolutions, which generated a vast agrarian surplus in the form of elevated rural income, in fueling their capitalist-industrial takeoff in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The nontransition to capitalism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China, despite its vast agrarian surplus, suggests that high agricultural productivity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a capitalist-industrial takeoff. What China lacked, and England and Japan both possessed, was an entrepreneurial elite strong enough to siphon a large portion of economic gains off the rural sector and divert them to industrial investment (but not strong enough to strangle autonomous and sustained agricultural development, as seen in early modern Tuscany).

Second, this study supports the recent actor-centric approach to capitalist development, according to which the historical rise of capitalism was not an automatic outgrowth of particular structural conditions, but hinged on certain elite actors' tactical actions in pursuit of greater security and greater command of surplus under particular fabrics of interelite politics (Lachmann 2000) and urban-rural interactions (Emigh 2003). Industrial capitalism did not emerge in China despite the existence of many structural processes, such as expanding com-

merce, agricultural productivity growth, and the state's increasing reliance on mercantile activities, which are supposed to foment capitalist transition according to actor-less theories of capitalist transition. Instead, the nontransition to capitalism in Qing China was a result of the urban entrepreneurs' propensity to transform themselves into rural gentry or state elite, but not vice versa.

Third, besides bringing our attention to urban entrepreneurs as crucial actors who accounted for China's nontransition, this study advances the actor-centric approach. It attests to the significance of tracing the social-reproduction strategies of elite families in explicating the contours of interelite politics (Adams 2005). This study also reinforces the relevance of class politics (see Brenner 1985), which is underplayed in more recent actor-centric theories. After all, it was China's increasingly contentious lower classes, in juxtaposition with the state's paternalist sympathy toward them in the eighteenth century and its incapacity to check their growth in the nineteenth century, that made entrepreneurial income far from secure and therefore constrained their reproduction. This peculiar class politics was, remarkably, rooted in the paternalist ideology of Confucianism, which designated the state as a grand patriarch obliged to protect the weak from the strong within the empire, as in an imagined family (Hung 2008).

A caveat to the above conclusions is that the existence of a strong urban entrepreneurial elite, as identified in this study, is just another necessary ingredient leading to the historical rise of industrial capitalism, and it may not be the last one. It is very possible that a detailed examination of another negative case of capitalist transition will point to yet another necessary factor. As Collins (1980) once noted, industrial-capitalist takeoff was never caused by a single factor but by a series of combinations of contingent historical conditions, our knowledge of which can only be advanced through successive approximations.

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