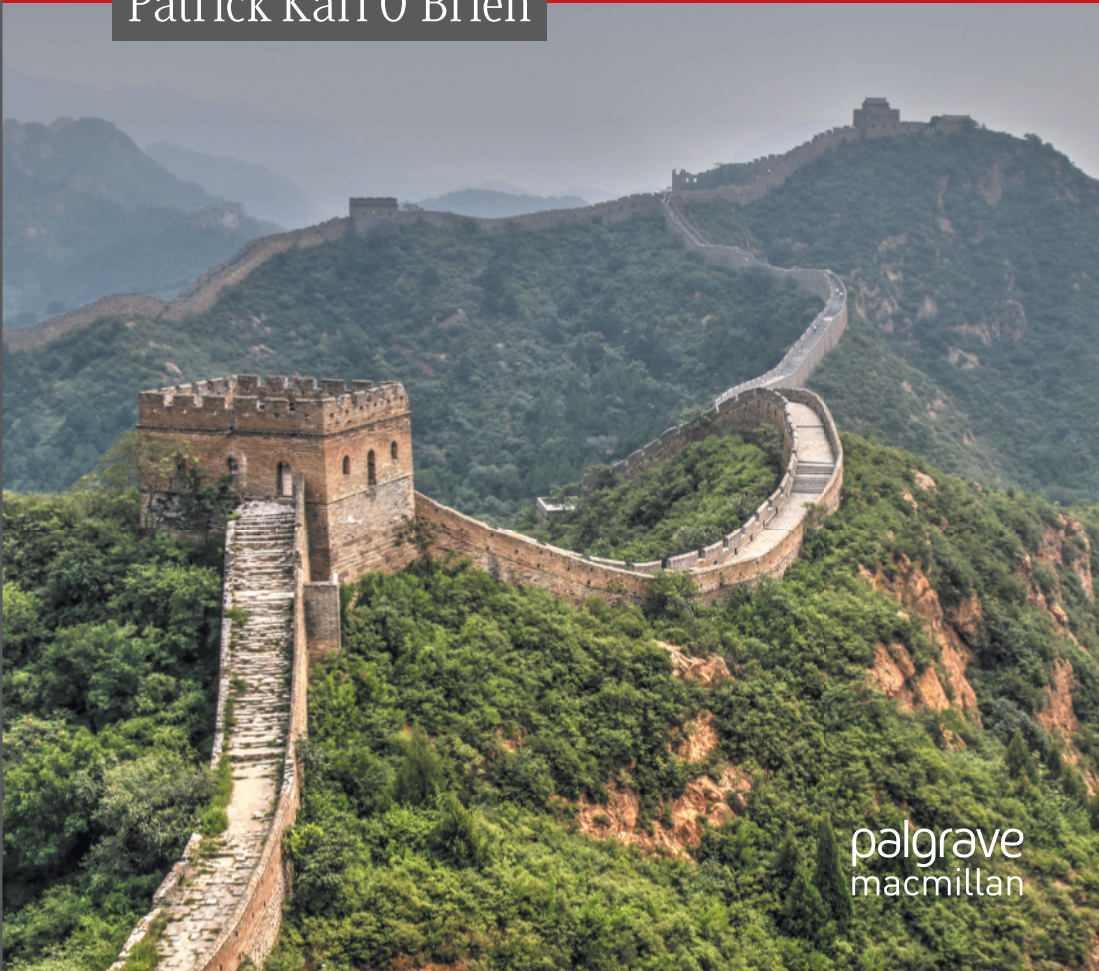




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The Economies of Imperial China and Western Europe *Debating the Great Divergence*

Patrick Karl O'Brien



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*In memorium to Cassy and I hope this book will promote further and
future conversations with my friends and fellow economic historians:
Bob Allen and Peer Vries*

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My late career as an economic historian has remained intellectually exciting and socially enjoyable largely because years ago I decided to reallocate more of my reading and research time into an engagement with global economic history. That occurred at a time of “globalization” when that field was moving from a stage of imminence to prominence in history departments of major universities throughout the world. The revival of this style of history in a comparative form, depends very heavily on intellectual collaboration among colleagues and friends who wish to share the specialized knowledge they have acquired from their studies of the economies, politics and cultures of Afro-Asian and South American cultures.

I was singularly fortunate when I decided to move my research and reading away from British and European economic history to become a Fellow at St Antony’s College in the University of Oxford, working among a group of colleagues with the linguistic credentials and distinguished scholarly records derived from their specialized research on the economies of China (Mark Elvin); India (Tapan Raychaudhuri);

The original version of the book was revised: Additional corrections have been updated in the chapters. Corrections to the book are available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54614-4_8

Islamdom (Roger Owen); Japan (Ann Waswo); Russia (Angus Walker) and South America (Jeremy Adelman).

My network of influential colleagues widened when I was invited by the late Jerry Martin (Chairman of the Renaissance Trust) to participate in a sequence of conferences and workshops convened to analyse and discuss “Achievements and Creativity” in the interrelated histories of Western science, technological innovation, cities, art and economic progress. At workshops and conferences (convened and coached by Jerry Martin a distinguished engineer, inventor and entrepreneur) academics from several disciplines remote from economic history engaged in heuristic discourses about the history of innovation. They (Margaret Boden, Alan Macfarlane, Steven Shapin, Robert Fox, Simon Schaffer, Rob Iliffe, Ian Inkster, Penny Gouk) and their networks educated me in “ways of knowing and understanding” economic growth from new intellectual perspectives. That phase of education proved to be extremely useful when I obtained grants from the Leverhulme Trust and the European Science Foundation to convene collaborative programmes of research and discourse at the London School of Economics in the, by then, established and expanding field of Global Economic History.

Networking across continents as well as the boundaries of universities and disciplines has kept me in regular, helpful and heuristic contact with leading members of the California School (Roy Bin Wong, Ken Pomeranz, Roberts Marks, Jack Goldstone). And in touch with distinguished groups of historians with expertise on the long-run development of the many regions of our global economy. That peer group included: Peer Vries, Maarten Prak, Jan-Luiten Van Zanden, Matthias Middell, Stephen Broadberry, Maxine Berg, Giorgio Riello, Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla, Eric Vanhoute for Europe. For India, I have been privileged to enjoy connexions with Prasanna Parthasarathi, Tirthankar Roy and David Washbrook. For Africa with Gareth Austin. For China with Kent Deng, Mark Elvin, Bozhong Li, Richard Von Glahn and Harriet Zurndorfer. For Latin America, Alejandra Irigoin and Regina Grafe. For Japan, Penelope Francks, Kaoru Sugihara and Shigeru Akita and for everywhere with Gervaise Clarence-Smith.

Many more names could and should be listed of academics who have shared my aspiration for the revival of metanarratives in global economic history and who have recognized the need for collaborative, cross-disciplinary research, discourse and debate in order to refine, deepen and diffuse that aspiration. I thank them all for the education, ideas

and insights that have enabled me to create an impression that I know something about the economic histories of several parts of our globalizing economy and to write this book. All our books are collective endeavours, but I owe a special word of thanks to the California School for creating a famous controversy around the Great Divergence which informs and permeates the chapters of this Palgrave Pivot. Above all I am truly grateful to my friends and mentors, Mark Elvin and Kent Deng. They have patiently and unselfishly shared with an “outsider” and mere amateur their extraordinary range of erudition on all the complex forces and factors (including that important climacteric in science and technology) that maintained the economy of Imperial China on a trajectory for political and institutional development that led to centuries of prolonged divergence with the West.

Finally, I must convey my appreciation to two top administrators (Lorraine Long and Priscilla Frost). They have carried the essential logistical burdens involved in the organization of enterprises in academic collaboration across frontiers of countries and boundaries of universities with discretion, charm and efficiency.

Oxford, UK
July 2021

Patrick Karl O’Brien

PRAISE FOR *THE ECONOMIES OF IMPERIAL CHINA AND WESTERN EUROPE*

“No scholar has done more to promote global economic history than Patrick O’Brien. In this brief but dense text he presents his position in the biggest debate in that field. He analyses why China, long the world’s most advanced organic economy, was overtaken by industrializing Western Europe. His main explanation is endogenous: The country depleted its natural endowment and its government did hardly anything about it. I agree.”

—Peer Vries, *International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam*

“Patrick O’Brien has led the renaissance of global history, especially global economic history, in Europe. This energetically written book is a masterly expression of his erudition and argumentative incisiveness as he synthesises and dissects the Great Divergence debate of the last twenty years.”

—Gareth Austin, *Professor of Economic History, University of Cambridge*

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Historiographical Context and Bibliographical Guide

Abstract This chapter reminds readers that the recent rise in the volume of publications in the economic history of Imperial China has been promoted by the extraordinarily rapid rate of economic growth achieved by the Peoples' Republic over the last forty years. The economic and, by implication, the geopolitical advance of communist China to a position of eminence within and significance for the growth of the world economy at large has raised the meta historical question of when, how and why did the Chinese economy decline into a condition of relative backwardness compared with advanced modern economies of Western Europe, North America, Australasia and Japan? The question remains germane and salient because western views of the Chinese state economy and society were (as historiographical surveys reveal) almost entirely favourable before the eras of industrialization and enlightenment in Western Europe. Thereafter western intellectuals entertained increasingly negative perceptions of Chinese civilization that degenerated into Eurocentric levels of denigration and contempt before 1914. Although Eurocentrism became less common in the wake of the barbarous conflicts of the twentieth century, condescension continued until the Chinese economy revealed its underlying potential for modern economic growth after the death of Mao in 1976. Thus, the protracted debate on the Great Divergence can be represented as a controversy inspired by a generation of Sinologists who have attempted with some success to rescue the economic history of Imperial