Center for Economic Institutions
Working Paper Series

No. 2022-2

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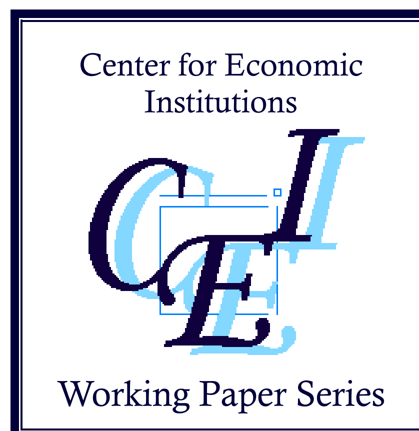
Chiaki Moriguchi and Tuan-Hwee Sng

August, 2022



Institute of Economic Research
Hitotsubashi University
2-1 Naka, Kunitachi, Tokyo, 186-8603 JAPAN
https://cei.ier.hit-u.ac.jp/English/index.html
Tel:+81-42-580-8405/Fax:+81-42-580-8333

The Size of Polities in Historical Political Economy

Chiaki Moriguchi and Tuan-Hwee Sng*

August 1, 2022

Abstract

This paper is organized into four themes. We first appraise the views of historical thinkers in the East and West on the consequences of the size of polities. Next, we survey modern historical studies on the relationship between polity size and governance. We then discuss attempts to provide a unified framework on the causes and consequences of polity size. Finally, we explore how history can illuminate our understanding of the size of polities.

Keywords: Size of Nations; Country Size and Governance; Institutions and Growth; Comparative Institutional Analysis

JEL Codes: H1; N0; N4; N90; P48; P5

* Chiaki Moriguchi, Institute of Economic Research, Hitotsubashi University. Email: chiaki@ier.hit-u.ac.jp. Tuan-Hwee Sng, Department of Economics, National University of Singapore. Email: tsng@nus.edu.sg. This paper is forthcoming as a chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Historical Political Economy*. We thank the editors, Jeffery Jenkins and Jared Rubin, for comments on an earlier draft of this chapter and Yidan Han for research support.

1 INTRODUCTION

> [A] very populous city can rarely, if ever, be well governed.
>
> —Aristotle

> Confucius said, "There are not two suns in the sky, nor two sovereigns over the people."
>
> —Mencius

Polities vary widely in size, in terms of geography as well as population, both today and over the course of history. Russia, the largest country in the world, has a land area almost 40 million times that of Vatican City, the smallest country. In the late nineteenth century, Queen Victoria's British empire — the largest polity in world history — comprised more than one-fifth of the world's land area and population. Less than 1,400 kilometers from Buckingham Palace, Charles Bertoleoni, a self-proclaimed king, ruled over a population of around 55 inhabitants on the island of Tavolara, off the northeast coast of Sardinia (Maddison, 2001; New York Times, 1896, 1928).

The size of polities has varied not only across space at any given time, but also over time in any given space. Ancient Chinese texts claimed that there were tens of thousands of states or statelets in China during the time of King Yu (c. 2200 BCE). As polities grew in size, the number of polities shrank. By the time of King Tang six hundred years later (Sellmann, 2002), there were three thousand polities. In 221 BCE, the state of Qin became the sole polity when it annexed its neighbors and expanded its borders to complete the first unification of China.

Occasionally, such changes may occur within a short span of time. In classical Greece, several hundred *poleis* or city states traditionally occupied the small plains and narrow valleys that were surrounded by rugged mountains. Each *polis* was so small that Plato spoke of a population of 5,040 citizens (household heads) as the ideal size of a *polis*. Yet less than four decades after Plato's death, Alexander the Great — who was taught by Plato's student and colleague, Aristotle — created an empire that extended from Greece and Egypt to India, ruling as many as 20 million people (McEvedy and Jones, 1978, p. 125). For a more recent example, we only need to look back to the last century. In 1950, there were 60 member states in the United Nations. But the collapse of colonial empires and the Soviet Union in the second half of the 20th century more than tripled the number of UN member states within 50 years.

Historically, the size and number of polities have captivated scholars from various parts of the world. Most would agree that a polity's size has a salient impact on the welfare of its citizens. Yet scholars from different cultural traditions have held very different views on the impacts of polity size and the optimal size of a polity. In this short chapter, we first review how philosophers in Europe and China traditionally viewed the subject (Section 2). Next, we present the findings from modern historical research on the consequences of polity size (Section 3). We then shift our attention to the causes of polity size (Section 4) before drawing conclusions.

It is neither our goal, nor is it possible, to provide a comprehensive discussion on a topic as important as this. Our modest objective is to highlight a few salient aspects of the size of polities, and to make some suggestions on the way forward. We recommend that readers refer to other chapters of the handbook, especially Mark Dincecco and Yuhua Wang's chapter on State Capacity and Noel Johnson and Mark Koyama's chapter on Legal Capacity, both of which share a number of overlapping and complementary themes with our chapter.

2 Historical Thinkers on The Consequences of Size

A long tradition in Western philosophy, traceable to the classical Greeks, views size as detrimental to good governance. Plato extolled the virtue of smallness in enabling citizens to know and to care for each other. Aristotle stressed that while a polity must be large enough to be self-sufficient, there should be a limit to its size; otherwise, its citizens will not have sufficient knowledge of each other's characters to elect the right governors and judges. As a rule of thumb, he proposed that a state should not be so large that its citizens could not gather in an open space to hold a public conversation (Dahl and Tufte, 1973; Aristotle, 2016).

The thinkers of the Enlightenment, especially Montesquieu and Rousseau, continued to equate smallness with citizen participation and cohesiveness. Rousseau put forth a particularly lucid analysis arguing that extending the social bond weakens it. As the state enlarges, he claimed, individuals will care more about their personal interests and less about their collective wellbeing, for "the people have less affection for their leaders whom they never see, for their country, which is in their eyes like the world, and for their fellow-citizens, most of whom are strangers to them" (Rousseau, 2002, p. 186). Meanwhile, administrative costs will increase due to the need to set up multiple layers of government to administer a large territory. Eventually, the "many additional

burdens perpetually exhaust the subjects; and far from being better governed by all these different orders, they are less well governed than if they had but a single order above them" (p. 185).

As the opening quotes of this chapter suggest, the perspectives of mainstream philosophers in China could not have been more different than their Western counterparts. Mencius, a contemporary of Aristotle, saw political disunity as a root cause of instability. He was not alone in this belief. With few exceptions, Chinese thinkers in history promoted the virtues of maintaining a large and unified state to avoid the misery of war. This consensus was not simply a product of China's recurring unifications in history, for it was already repeatedly echoed by those who lived before the first unification by Qin Shi Huang in 221 BCE. Pines (2000, 2012) observes that each of the major philosophies that emerged in the pre-Qin period of political fragmentation contended that the division of "All under Heaven" into competing warring states was the cause of the endless conflicts and sufferings that China witnessed during the Axial Age. Leading thinkers including Confucius, Mozi, Laozi, and Shangyang, who represented different schools of thoughts and argued fiercely over a wide range of sociopolitical and philosophical issues, concurred on the desirability of political unification, which they believed would bring order and an enormous peace dividend in terms of lives and resources saved. *Lü shi chunqiu*, a collection of political essays, compiled around 239 BCE, which fused the ideas of the major Chinese philosophies, puts it as follows: "There is no turmoil greater than the absence of the Son of Heaven; without the Son of Heaven, the strong overcome the weak, the many lord it over the few, they incessantly use arms to harm each other." (Pines, 2000, p. 316).

3 Modern Studies on The Consequences of Polity Size

Studies in political science and economics largely endorse the classical Western perspective that polity size has a negative impact on governance quality. In a study of preindustrial Europe, Stasavage (2011) finds that representative assemblies in large states were less likely to convene regularly and therefore functioned less effectively due to high communication and travel costs.[1]

[1] Contemporary studies corroborate the finding. A study investigating capital cities of U.S. states finds that isolated capital cities are more likely to encounter issues of accountability, corruption, and inefficient public goods provision (Campante and Do, 2014). Olsson and Hansson (2011) suggest that the burden of size affects democracies and nondemocracies alike. They empirically investigate 127 contemporary countries varying across regime types and detect a negative relationship between territorial size and the rule of law.

Other researchers argue that the size and number of polities affect long-run economic development. In fact, a long list of scholars have attributed the rise of Europe to its political fragmentation, which according to them, gave Europe a decisive developmental edge. Baechler (1975) considers Europe's political anarchy as the driving force behind its willingness to engage in political, economic, and scientific experimentations. Cowen (1990) traces the development of capital markets and pro-market policies in Europe to its vibrant interstate competition. Tilly (1990) attributes the emergence of nation states in early modern Europe to the capital-intensive city states of the Middle Ages. Mokyr (2007, p. 24) notes that "many of the most influential and innovative intellectuals took advantage of … the competitive 'states system.'" Diamond (1997, p. 414) argues that in contrast to China, where "a decision by one despot could and repeatedly did halt innovation," "Europe's geographic balkanization resulted in dozens or hundreds of independent, competing statelets and centers of innovation."

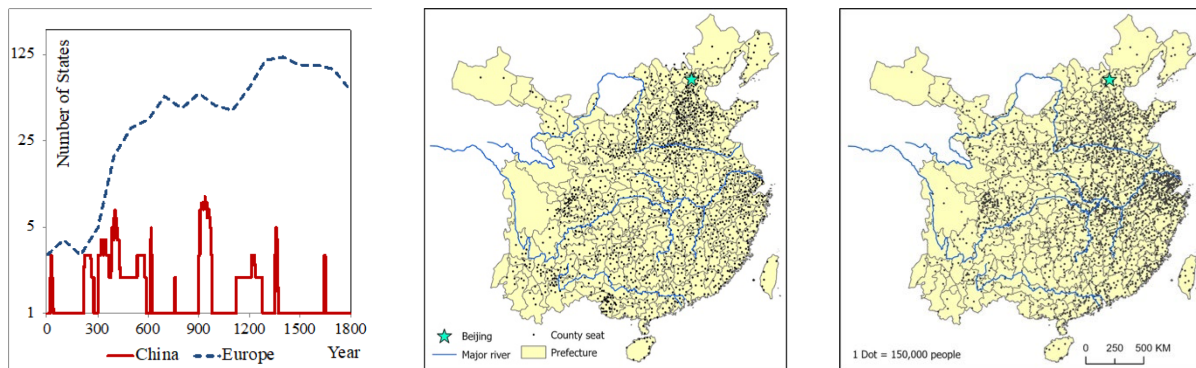
According to Stasavage (2016), the collapse of the Roman Empire — which led to the breakdown of Western Europe into a set of small, fragmented states — kept the transaction costs of maintaining assemblies low. This, in turn, set Europe on a different political trajectory that culminated in its economic rise. Scheidel (2019), too, views the failure of empire building in Europe after the fall of Rome as the enabler of the rise of the West. He argues that Europe's enduring polycentrism after the sixth century ensured that there was no empire to suppress competition and innovation. To reinforce his notion that there would have been no modernity without polycentrism, he even quotes an unlikely source, Chairman Mao, who commented that "one good thing about Europe is that all its countries are independent. Each of them does its own thing, which makes it possible for the economy of Europe to develop at a fast pace. Ever since China became an empire after the Qin dynasty, our country has been for the most part unified. One of its defects has been bureaucratization, and excessively tight control. The localities could not develop independently" (pp. 16, 201).

As Mao's quote suggests, if polity size is indeed detrimental to good governance, the evidence should have been most salient in China, given the long history of the Chinese empire. As Figure 1A illustrates, for more than half of the past two millennia, the country was ruled by a unified state with the emperor as a figure of political and moral authority at the top of the administrative pyramid (Ko and Sng, 2013). The opening line of the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* succinctly captures the expectation among the Chinese that every episode of political

fragmentation must be followed by a new cycle of unification: “The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide.” No other region in the world has produced and sustained large empires with such regularity.

History suggests that unified Chinese regimes may have experienced considerable administrative diseconomies of scale. As William Skinner (1977) highlights, the number of Chinese counties had a tendency to shrink during times of political unification. For instance, during the mid-sixth century when China was ruled by three competing regimes, there were about 2,300 counties in total. Several decades later, only 1,255 counties were left after the Sui dynasty reunified China and reorganized its territorial administration.

Figure 1



(A) Number of regimes in China between 0 CE and 1800. Adapted from Ko et al. (2018).

(B) There were fewer than 1,400 counties in China in 1820. Counties were more sparsely distributed in the south than in the north, where the capital city was located. Adapted from Sng (2014).

(C) In 1820, the most densely populated region in China was the Yangtze River Delta. There were more people residing in the south than in the north. Adapted from Sng (2014).

Furthermore, as Figure 1B illustrates, in the early modern period, counties — the lowest level of formal administration in imperial China — were densely distributed in the vicinity of the capital city, Beijing, in the north, and grew progressively sparser farther to the south despite the fact that more people lived in the south than in the north (Figure 1C). The patterns suggest that despite the popular perception of the early modern Chinese state as an autocratic regime with virtually unchecked powers, in reality it was hamstrung by a limited capacity to extend its reach (Sng, 2014), especially to areas far away from the capital city.

Indeed, the early modern Chinese state apparatus was unusually small even by preindustrial standards. In 1800, only around 20,000 ranked officials governed a population that may have exceeded 300 million. This translates to a ratio of one official per 15,000 people.[2] To give a loose comparison, Pintner (1980, p. 192) estimates that Tsarist Russia had one official per 10,000 people. The direct tax system of Louis XIV's France hired 3,000 officers, or one tax officer for every 7,700 people (Collins, 2009, pp. 208, 245). England, traditionally viewed as a state of small government, had one royal official for every 4,000 people in the 16th century (Sacks, 1994, p. 36). The imperial Chinese state also taxed lightly. It captured a mere 2.4 percent of the national income in the early twentieth century (Wang, 1973). When measured in silver, per capita tax revenue in China was only 11% of England's in 1750 (Ko et al., 2018, Table 5).[3]

Sng and Moriguchi (2014) posit that in the age of premodern communication technologies, a large and centralized state like China faced a severe principal-agent problem that imposed acute limitations on the exercise of state power, which in turn led to low state capacity. To test their conjecture, they build a dynamic model and use the Tokugawa shogunate in Japan as a counterfactual to pre-1850 China, utilizing the shared cultural, institutional, and technological heritages of the two countries as a basis to investigate the impact of territorial size on administrative performance. They show theoretically and empirically that Japan's geographical compactness allowed the Tokugawa shogunate to tax more and provide more public goods (coins, roads, urban management, forest management, and famine relief) on a per capita basis, while Qing China faced stiffer administrative challenges in managing a sprawling empire from its capital city. Despite producing a host of institutional innovations to improve administrative efficiency, many of which were subsequently adopted by Tokugawa Japan, Qing China suffered from more severe corruption and exhibited a lower degree of fiscal resilience over time (Figure 2).

[2] By conventional measures, early modern China had a very small government. The county was the lowest level of government in imperial China. In 1820, there were fewer than 1,400 counties governing a population that had reached 380 million (Skinner, 1977; Cao, 2000). The difficulties faced by understaffed county yamen and overworked magistrates in collecting taxes, arresting criminals, hearing court cases, and enforcing judgements, and the consequent neglect of many government tasks are recurring themes in many historical studies (see, for example, Ch'u, 1962; Watt, 1977; Macauley, 1998; Buoye, 2004).

[3] Rosenthal and Wong (2011) argue that the Chinese state taxed lightly because it was under no pressing need to collect more due to a relatively peaceful external environment. However, in instances when such a need arose, efforts to raise revenue often escalated political instability to the point of threatening regime survival. For example, when the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) attempted to raise taxes to meet a rising military threat from Manchuria, it sparked a wave of rebellion in North China that led to its downfall.

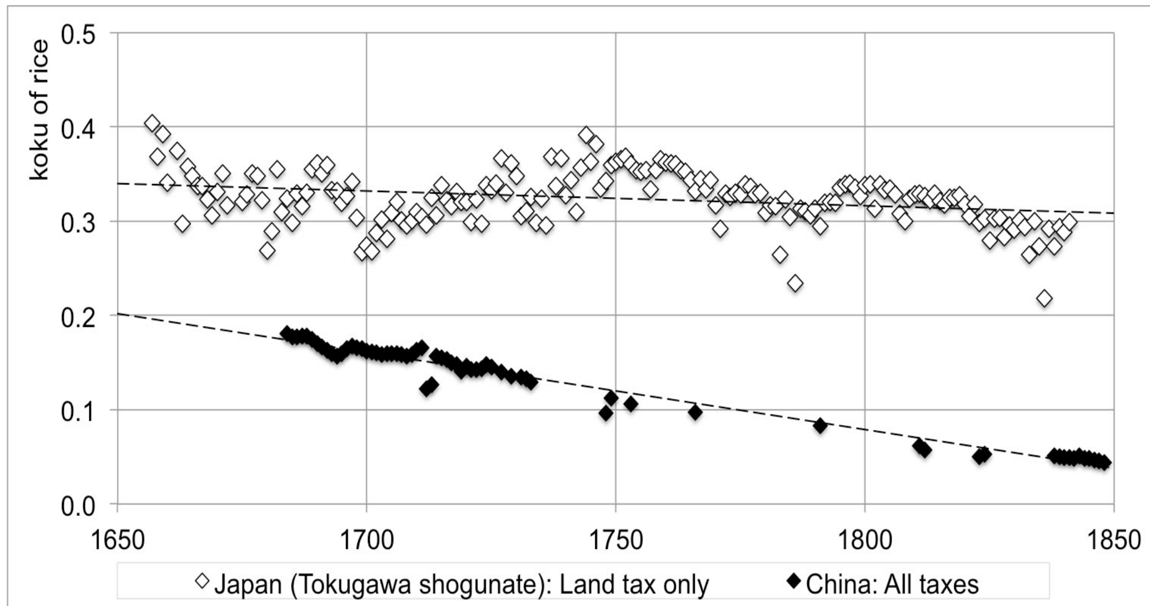


Figure 2: Per Capita Tax Revenue in China and Japan in 1650–1850. Adapted from Sng and Moriguchi (2014).

An example of a Chinese invention that turned out to function more effectively in Japan than in China is the petition system. First instituted in the 7th century, the petition system was designed to offer a channel for commoners to complain directly to the emperor about abuse of power and other malfeasance by officials. However, the sheer size of the Chinese population made it impossible for the emperor to verify the authenticity of every accusation (Ocko, 1988; Fang, 2009). During the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), two emperors, Qianlong (r. 1736–1795) and Jiaqing (r. 1796–1820), actively encouraged petitions from their subjects when they came to the throne. But in each instance, the emperor swiftly reversed his stance after discovering that he could not possibly handle the flood of complaints that followed (Fang, 2009). By contrast, the petition system functioned reasonably well when it was implemented in Tokugawa Japan in the 18th century (Ohira, 2003). Historical evidence suggests that while irrelevant requests and false accusations were a constant nuisance, the volume of complaints was manageable and the petitions were duly processed. Punishments were regularly meted out to corrupt officials as well as to petitioners who were found to have made misstatements. In addition to exposing corruption, individual petitions also led to the creation of fire brigades and the establishment of a hospital for the poor in the shogun's capital city, Edo (Roberts, 1994).

4 The Determinants of Polity Size

The studies we have discussed thus far suggest that small is beautiful. However, these studies, by design, focus primarily on the costs of polity size while largely overlooking the benefits. The consequences of polity size cannot be singularly negative; otherwise, our world would be one of extreme political fragmentation. As the ancient Chinese philosophers pointed out, interstate military competition could cause severe resource wastage and the neglect of considerable economic externalities. The Western philosophers, too, were concerned that states that are too small may be incapable of preserving their autonomy. Rousseau stressed that while large states risk being crushed under their own weight, small states are in danger of being easily overrun by their neighbors; it is therefore "not the least of a statesman's talents to find the proportion between the two which is most advantageous for the preservation of the State" (p. 186). Clearly, we need a holistic approach that looks at both the costs and benefits of polity size to evaluate its causes and consequences.

Friedman (1977) and Alesina and Spolaore (1997, 2003) have made pioneering efforts in using formal models to study the determinants of polity size. Friedman (1977) conjectures that a territory ought to be assigned — voluntarily or by coercion — to a polity that places the highest value on its revenue. He then investigates changes in Europe's political map from Roman to modern times and finds reasonable explanatory power to his conjecture. In a paper written after the disintegration of the former Soviet bloc, Alesina and Spolaore (1997) build a theoretical framework that explains the number and size of polities based on the tradeoff between the benefits of maintaining a large polity (i.e., a large domestic market and lower per capita cost in the provision of public goods) and the costs of managing a large population with heterogeneous preferences. This tradeoff was summarized by Robert Barro in an earlier *Wall Street Journal* article published in 1991:

> We can think of a country's optimal size as emerging from a tradeoff: A large country can spread the cost of public goods, such as defining a legal and monetary system and maintaining national security, over many taxpayers, but a large country is also likely to have a diverse population that is difficult for the central government to satisfy.[4]

[4] See also Robinson (1960), the conference proceeding of a workshop organized by the *International Economic Association* on the "Economic Consequences of the Size of Nations" in 1957. While dated, the volume provides scores

Alesina and Spolaore's (1997) framework produces several testable predictions, including (i) nonautocratic or democratic states will be smaller than autocratic ones; (ii) majority voting is likely to produce too many small states; and (iii) economic integration will likely increase the number of polities while reducing the size. Alesina et al. (2000) provide empirical support of some of these predictions.

Despite these efforts, there is still much to be done. One particular area that needs attention, as Gerring and Veenendaal (2020) highlight, is the phenomenon that the size of polities vary by a substantially greater margin than the size of other institutions. For instance, China's population of 1.3 billion is 130,000 times that of Tuvalu. By contrast, Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, possibly the largest university in the world by enrolment, has a student population of four million, which is *only* 2,600 times larger than École normale supérieure, which has about 1,500 students. Alesina and Spolaore (1997) focus on the symmetric equilibrium, i.e., the model "predicts" that all states have equal size. While this feature is necessary to keep their model mathematically tractable, it also means that the framework has limited explanatory power on why very large states and very small ones coexist; if all states face more or less the same tradeoff in size, why the immense variation in real world outcomes at any single point in time?

We do not have a panacea, but we argue that maintaining a historical perspective is critical in the quest to explain the size of polities. History helps us to look beyond the present and the immediate past, and to consider the sources of stability and variation over time. We highlight three insights that history brings to the table. First, historians as well as social scientists studying the past generally agree that the particularities of individual regions and societies matter. Factors including geography, institutions, and culture, which vary widely across space and over time, have played influential roles in driving state formation. For instance, Montesquieu and David Hume, among others, argued that Europe's geography discouraged the emergence of empires, as its large mountain ranges and long and indented coastlines cut the continent into several geographical cores that fostered a plurality of independent political centers.[5] Diamond (1998, pp. 433–34) claims that

of case studies investigating the costs and benefits of polity size. The paper presented by Simon Kuznets on the viability of small states, in particular, offered perceptive insights that are still relevant today.

[5] Scheidel (2019) holds that the rise of Roman empire was *sui generis*, enabled by a fortuitous coincidence of conditions, including the possession of an unusually bellicose military culture that helped maintain exceptionally high military participation rates. Reale and Dirmeyer (2000) provide evidence of favorable climatic conditions around the

by contrast, China, with "a much less indented coastline, no islands large enough to achieve autonomy, and less formidable internal mountain barriers," has been subjected to fewer geographical constraints to political unification. And "once a unified Chinese state was founded, geography prevented any other state from gaining lasting autonomy in any part of China."[6]

Others have drawn attention to other characteristics of geography, culture, and institutions to explain observed patterns of political consolidation (Qian and Sng, 2021). Wittfogel's (1957) theory of Oriental Despotism contends that climatic conditions drove many societies, mostly in Asia, to organize large-scale irrigation projects, which in turn led to the birth of a strong state capable of projecting its power far and wide. [7] Lattimore (1940) and others have highlighted the influence of nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppe, who enjoyed a distinctive advantage in war due to their expertise on horseback, on empire formation in Eurasia (see, in particular, Grousset, 1970; Barfield, 1989; Turchin, 2009). Yet others emphasize cultural and institutional factors. Pines (2000, 2012), whom we discussed above, sees the shared conviction among major Chinese philosophies in the desirability of a unitary state as a key driver of China's recurring unification. Miyazaki (1983) and Bodde (1986) highlight the role of the iconographic Chinese script, which allowed local elites from different parts of the country to communicate with one another, in keeping China unified. Ma and Rubin (2019) argue that the absolutist nature of the Chinese state drove it to expand into hostile territories. A small yet influential literature studying the legacy of imperialism in the form of artificial boundaries in the Middle East and Africa finds that polities whose size and shape disregard ethnic and cultural patterns are more likely to be exposed to civil conflict and economic instability (Alesina et al., 2011; Michalopoulos and Papaioannou, 2016). None of these arguments are uncontested, yet all highlight the perils of thinking about the number and size of polities in a region without considering the region's unique traits and circumstances. Do geography, climate, a common language, militarism, colonialism, and other factors influence the size of polities in different parts of the world in similar ways? If not, why? These are interesting and important questions that cannot be adequately answered without an understanding of history.

Mediterranean sea during the classical period, which might have contributed to the emergence and endurance of the Roman empire.

[6] The argument has been challenged by Hoffman (2015), Hui (2005), and others. See Fernández-Villaverde et al. (2020) for a recent take and a formal test of the hypothesis.

[7] While the theory has been widely criticized for some perceived empirical inconsistencies, a recent paper finds evidence that societies historically dependent on irrigation are generally less equal and more autocratic today (Bentzen, Kaarsen, and Wingender, 2017).

Acknowledging that the particularities of individual regions matter does not imply that we should give up on the goal of building theoretical frameworks to explain the size of polities. Instead, incorporating the insights gained from studying different historical societies can enrich our models and improve their explanatory powers. For instance, Alesina and Spolaore (2003) use cultural diversity as a determinant of the cost of polity size in their model. Historical studies could help shed light on the extent to which such costs exist. Building on the steppe theory of Lattimore (1940) and others, Ko et al. (2018) use historical analyses of violent conflicts between nomads in the Eurasian steppe and their agrarian neighbors to construct a Hotelling-style comparative model that examines the causes and consequences of political unification and fragmentation at the two ends of Eurasia. They hypothesize that China faced a severe, recurring nomadic threat on its northern frontier due to its proximity to the Eurasian steppe, but was otherwise relatively isolated, while Western Europe was exposed to periodic invasions from the rest of Eurasia on various fronts, but was protected by distance from the steppe threat. The hypothesis generates predictions on the size of polities, the locations of capital cities, and variations in population growth, which are in turn used to explain patterns in historical China and Europe. As these examples illustrate, much more can be done in marrying history and political economy analyses to investigate the size of polities in general or comparative contexts.

Second, besides variations across space, a historical approach offers a rich set of examples to help identify the forces that shape polity size over time. For instance, Bean (1973) provides an insightful analysis on how military technological change influenced the size of states in late Medieval Europe. He argues that the rise of the professional infantry, which proved to be effective in battles against the heavy cavalry, as well as the improved siege cannon undermined the military importance of the knights and rocked the very foundation of the feudal society. These changes in the art of war led to a dramatic increase in the size of armies and military expenditures. Polities that were unable to centralize power and resources were eliminated. Those remaining became larger and more centralized. By 1600, the number of autonomous and semi-autonomous domains had fallen compared with just two centuries ago, and the first generation of European nation states had emerged. The study highlights technology as a powerful force instigating episodes of synchronized drifts toward either political centralization or political fragmentation throughout history.

Last but not least, we argue that investigating regional systems in history may shed light on the wide variation in state size. Take the Pax Tokugawa for instance. A remarkably long period of peace was maintained in Japan between 1615, after the Tokugawa shogunate annihilated the Toyotomi clan in the siege of Osaka, and 1853 when the Black Ships arrived from the United States to coerce Japan into opening its ports to American trade. Under Pax Tokugawa, Japan, with a land area smaller than present-day Italy, was a collection of more than 260 domains, each led by a daimyo or lord. The shogun, the largest daimyo, controlled four million koku of land.[8] Fewer than ten other daimyo each controlled more than 0.5 million koku of land. Many domains were no more than 10,000 koku. The shogun's relation with the other daimyo was one of first among equals. The daimyo swore allegiance to the shogun and were constrained by a system of regulations and norms designed to prevent dissent. But otherwise the daimyo retained virtually complete autonomy over their individual domains. This "international" system showed remarkable resilience, prevailing for more than two centuries before its collapse 15 years after the Black Ships Incident of 1853. When the shogunate proved incapable of holding on its own against the Western imperialist powers, the domains entered into civil war, which ultimately ended with the political unification of Japan (see Koyama et al., 2018, for a formal analysis).

Likewise, under the traditional East Asian tributary system, China's tributary states acknowledged the superior position of the Chinese emperor in exchange for peace and trading opportunities, as well as occasional military protection. When the Toyotomi clan of Japan invaded the Korean peninsula in the 1590s, China intervened militarily to preserve Joseon Korea's political autonomy. Once the power of the Chinese state declined in the 19th century, Korea lost its de facto independence. The Ryukyu Kingdom shared a similar fate. A tributary state of China for more than four centuries, Ryukyu was annexed by Japan in 1872.

We can also draw a parallel to the world system today. If we think of the United States as the anchor of an international system, small states proliferated in the 1990s not only because of an increase in economic integration as Alesina and Spolaore have argued, but also because the United States expanded its sphere of influence — and the boundary of the American-led system — after the demise of the Soviet Union. By the same reasoning, the annexations of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and a few other small European states by their neighbors after the Great Depression in the 1930s

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[8] Koku is a measure of volume, equivalent to 180.4 liters. One koku of rice has been historically regarded in Japan as the annual rice consumption of an adult man.

could be attributed to a weakened Britain and France and the refusal of the United States to interfere with European affairs. Put differently, very small states survive and thrive often not in spite of but because of the presence of a large and dominant state, which helps to maintain regional or international order by playing hegemon.

5 Conclusion

In Federalist No. 10, James Madison robustly rebutted the classical view that size presents a challenge to good governance. He contended that in an indirect democracy, there exists the risk that unworthy candidates be elected into office "by intrigue, by corruption or by other means [...] and then betray the interests of the people" (Hamilton et al., 2003, p. 44). Considering this potential risk, size is an advantage: "[A]s each representative will be chosen by a greater number of citizens in the large than in the small republic, it will be more difficult for unworthy candidates to practise with success the vicious arts" (p. 45).

Although Madison, in later writings, also warned about the drawbacks of a distant state,[9] his name has been regularly invoked to refute doubters who see large territorial states as either ill-suited for democracy or destined to suffer poor governance altogether. In recent years, confidence in the optimism of Federalist No. 10 may have been undermined by growing political polarization in mature democracies, especially the United States. While the timeline is still too short for any conclusion to be drawn, it is a timely reminder of the potential implications of polity size.

In this short chapter, we first highlight an intriguing distinction in the traditional views of the ideal polity size in Europe and China — Western philosophers since Plato have extolled the virtues of a small state, which is believed to bring about good governance, while Chinese thinkers see a plethora of small states as a recipe for disaster, in the form of endless wars. It is tempting to speculate why this difference in perception exists in the first place. Perhaps geography played a role. The lack of natural obstacles to deter invaders in the agriculturally rich North China plain, and hence a high frequency of destructive wars, led the ancient Chinese thinkers to favor the arrival of a Son of Heaven to end the bloodbath. Meanwhile, the rugged terrain of Greece promoted a

[9] In 1791, Madison wrote that "[t]he larger a country, the less easy for its real opinion to be ascertained [...] the more insignificant is each individual in his own eyes. This may be unfavorable to liberty" (Madison, 1983, p. 170). See Stasavage (2020, C. 12) for a recent discussion.

system of city states, and in the process shaped the worldview of the classical Greek philosophers. Equally fascinating is how these ideas, once they had taken root, may have subsequently influenced the choices of decisionmakers and hence the political maps of China and Europe. These are fertile areas of research.

Next, we discuss modern studies in political science and economics on the consequences of polity size. While much of the literature emphasizes the cost of size in democratic or republican regimes, some studies show that size harms autocracies too. Meanwhile, there appears to be a dearth of empirical work on the benefits of size. Hopefully, future work will address the gap.

Finally, the causes and consequences of size are interconnected. Therefore, there are merits to taking a unified approach that considers both causes and consequences in a single theoretical framework. Alesina and Spolaore (1997, 2003) offer a useful template that uses the costs and benefits of size to determine optimal polity size. We argue that historical insights have much to enrich such frameworks and contribute to our understanding of the drivers and implications of polity size.

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