

Title:

“Geopolitics and Asia’s Little Divergence: State Building in China and Japan After 1850”

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Abstract:

We provide a new framework to account for the diverging paths of political development and state building in China and Japan during the second half of the 19th century. The arrival of Western powers not only brought opportunities to adopt new technologies, but also threatened the national sovereignty of both Qing China and Tokugawa Japan. We argue that these threats produce an unambiguous tendency toward centralization and modernization for geographically small states, but place conflicting demands on larger states. We use our theory to study why China, which had been centralized for much of its history, experienced gradual disintegration upon the Western arrival, and how Japan, which had been politically fragmented for centuries, became unified and modernized during the same period. To further demonstrate its validity, we also apply our model to two other historical episodes of state building: the unification of Anglo-Saxon England in the 10th century and the rise of Muscovy during the 15th century.

JEL Codes: H2, H4, H56; N30; N33; N35; N40; N43; N45