

Student: (Jennifer Yum):

In *The Great Divergence*, Kenneth Pomeranz puts forth a conceptual shift. In last week's reading, Joan Scott had urged feminist historians to look for "new perspectives to old questions." Pomeranz goes a step farther by positing a new question altogether. Instead of "Why wasn't England the Yangzi Delta?" he asks "Why wasn't the Yangzi Delta England?" Though simplified, Pomeranz's main reasons for Europe's industrial breakthrough are: the fortuitous location of coal deposits in Britain and its relationship to the development of the coal and steam process, and overseas exploitation. His methodology is clear and consistent. To establish his case, he addresses a variety of difference variables, examining western Europe, then China (and Japan). Each of his comparisons end with similar conclusions. The following quotes exemplify his general approach: "So despite its dense population, Chinese pressure on the land was probably not so much worse than that in Europe in 1800" (236). Or, "Luxury demand was at least as dispersed among various classes of Chinese and Japanese as was among Europeans (165). In short, he proves that there were no substantive differences that could account for the European advantage outside those he explicitly mentions. Agricultural, commercial, proto-industrial, and ecological factors did not make western Europe a more likely candidate for industrialization before 1800. Most important to his argument is that any differences which appeared after the point of "great divergence" must be rendered void.

Pomeranz defends his methodology quite convincingly at the end of the book. He concedes that "accepting the importance of small factors can lead to intellectual anarchy," with "everybody championing as 'crucial' the factors that suit their personal agenda." According to Pomeranz, however, there are four reasons that save his analysis from falling into this category (280). Most compelling is the fourth: China and Japan are excellent examples of places that lacked coal supply at their cores and did not engage in overseas exploitation. In other words, his argument is so effective because it is comparative.

A historiographic question raised in this week's reading, then, is that of the comparative approach as a methodological tool. What is the most effective way of presenting comparative evidence? Historian Charles Tilly writes, "On the whole, comparative studies of big structures of large processes yield more intellectual return when investigators examine relatively small numbers of instances" (Tilly, 77). Tilly argues that "With large numbers, critical defenses and familiarity with context decline" (77). Indeed, by focusing the majority of his work on China, Japan, and Britain (three areas on which he has a firm historical grasp), Pomeranz avoids these traps. On the other hand, would compelling evidence from other region have strengthened his case?

Tilly also defines the four levels of history. 1) world-historical 2) world-systemic 2) macrohistorical and 3) microhistorical. Where would *The Great Divergence* fall? First, the work is based on global conjunctures. He explains how we got to a "Europe-centered world system" (4). His work is also macrohistory; he addresses the large processes of a region such as migration and commercialization. His analysis, though, neglects the "trivial" accounts of everyday folk that had been the forte of Ulrich's studies. Is the use of microhistorical evidence in global history even relevant? Lastly, an interesting point I came across during the Tilly reading was his dismissal of "world history": "Personally, my eyes falter and my legs shake on this great plain" (63). And having read parts of the *Mediterranean* I understand Tilly's critique that "Total history apparently exceeds Braudel's grasp" (68). How does Pomeranz save himself from falling

into this category?

All of Pomeranz's arguments make sense from the evidence he provides.

Nevertheless, I did find it a bit distracting that he prefaced so many points the following pattern: "we lack adequate data," but we can still "infer from the evidence that..." This is not to say that he is not meticulous in his handling of evidence. He does state after all that "We must compare not only the motors of technological change, but also the steering wheels—and the terrains over which different societies steered" (48). Reading this quote, I got the sense that the historian must look closely at the society at hand and not take for granted popularized notions such as the one that "Chinese science and technology stagnated" at this point—he insists that it did not (48). Further, like EP Thompson, Pomeranz notes that income should not be the only determinant of living standard. Rather, as was the case in China and Japan, "handicraft workers were almost certainly less fully detached from agriculture." Thus, they may have earned less, but they still enjoyed a "higher standard of living" than their "English or Dutch counterparts" (51).

The role of state policy and culture also played in the development of both economies. For example, the Chinese state, "suspicious of vagrants," did not encourage poor people to migrate to the urban centers. Rather, they were pushed to the rural peripheries (84). In the section on luxury goods, he comments "keeping up with the Joneses" did not entail investment in one's home in China (135). More broadly, this point alerted me to the danger of misinterpreting history when one does not have a firm cultural understanding of the region he is researching.