**Surveys of Asian Economic History: Guest Editors’ Introduction**

Duol Kim, Myongji University

Andrew J. Seltzer, Royal Holloway, University of London; London School of Economics; IZA; and Centre for Economic History (ANU)

We thank Kris Inwood for comments. The usual disclaimer applies.

This issue of the *Australian Economic History Review* is a collaboration between the Economic History Society of Australia and New Zealand (EHSANZ) and the Asian Historical Economics Society (AHES). The collaboration between the societies is natural given regional proximity and that the Australian Economic History Review (AEHR) is one of very few economic history journals to have a primary focus on the Asia-Pacific. The six papers in this issue are surveys of literature covering different aspects of the economic history of China, India, Japan, Korea, and Thailand.

The AEHR's long-standing interest in Asian economic history encompasses scattered contributions since 1959, including a 1991 special issue on Southeast Asia. The appointment of the Indonesian economic historian Pierre van der Eng to the role of editor in 2001 and his succession by the Chinese economic historian Stephen Morgan in 2006 began the reorientation of the AEHR to its current titular role as ‘an Asia-Pacific Journal’. The reorientation of the journal broadly follows Australia’s gradual political evolution from identifying as a remote outpost of Europe to being an Asia-Pacific nation. Between 2010 and 2020, 46 of 156 (29.5 percent) of papers have been primarily focused on Asia. Several others have been comparative and contained substantial Asian content. Perhaps more tellingly, since the inception of the Sir Timothy Coghlan Prize given annually for the best article in the AEHR, 11 of the 15 prizes have been awarded to articles on Asian topics. Currently, there is one associate editor, Dan Li, and seven members of the editorial board who specialise in Asian economic history.

The idea of the Asian Historical Economic Society dates back to 2007. During an international workshop at the Institute of Economic Research, Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo, the leaders of current AHES first discussed the possibility of a regular meeting focusing on Asian economic history in order to foster related research. After another meeting in Venice in 2008, the Asian Historical Economics Society was formally established at the Beijing conference in 2010. Since then, the conference has been held every two years. This meeting has grown rapidly and worked as a platform for sharing research results, exchanging ideas, and building friendship among scholars focusing on Asian economic history.

A shared interest in Asian economic history and other common goals have led to AHES and the EHANZ to discuss collaboration in various ways for last several years. This special issue surveying the literature on Asian economic history is one such effort. Although COVID-19 has unfortunately hindered us from presenting and discussing the papers at the AHES conference before publication, the collection of these surveys provides an overview of current trends of economics historical works on Asian economic history. It is hoped that it will work as a steppingstone for mutual future development between the two societies.

The papers in this issue are all by leading scholars of Asian economic history. Unlike previous special issues on Asia in 1991 and 2004, none of the authors are based in Australia and a majority are based in the country which they are writing about. This reflects a general trend toward the globalisation of economic history, to which the AEHR contributes.

The first paper, Bas van Leeuwen and Meimei Wang, ‘*Fenjiashu*: Economic Development in the Chinese Countryside Based on Household Division Inventories, ca. 1750–1910’ examines Chinese development during the late-Qing Dynasty using an underutilised data source – *Fenjiashu*, which are similar to western probate records. These records show the division of household assets, typically land, housing, and household items, following the death of the head of household. The paper examines two important questions using these records: First, did inheritance patterns, which were characterised by equal sharing between male descendants, lead to fragmentation of household assets, with the effects of reducing the average size agricultural holding and hence agricultural efficiency? Second, what was the average wealth based on bequests contained in *Fenjiashu*, how did this change within the period of this study, and is the pattern of changes in wealth obtained from bequests in these documents consistent with that from other contemporary sources?

The second paper, Tirthankar Roy, ‘Why Geography Matters to the Economic History of India’ explores the role of geography in shaping the economic growth and level of inequality of the country. The paper considers three aspects of geography: spatiality, e.g. the role of proximity and distance in determining agglomeration and transactions costs; natural resources, particularly availability of water; and climate, particularly the role of the monsoon. Western economists have long accepted that geographic specialisation along the principle of comparative advantage is an important driver of growth. This paper argues that India does not fit this model of growth, although spatiality was nevertheless important as India was characterised by urban agglomeration and regional clustering. India’s monsoon climate is the driving factor behind the second and third discussion points above. The climate is characterised by extreme seasonality, with hot and dry months followed by heavy rains. The extended periods of hot and dry months, coupled with periodic failures of the monsoon meant that water management and famine relief were primary functions of the state. The paper explores how state in intervention in the creation of canals and artificial storage systems and the management of wells mitigated against occurrence of drought. Finally, the paper explores how seasonality impacted Indian agriculture and led to higher levels of inequality than would have been the case if there was less temperature and rainfall variability.

The third paper, Yutaka Arimoto and Yoshihiro Sakane, ‘Agricultural development in Industrialising Japan, 1880–1940’ examines the role of agriculture in the Japanese economy after the Meiji Reformation. They conclude that agricultural markets were fairly efficient, and that this was an important contributing factor to Japan’s rapid industrialisation during this time period. Farm sizes tended to cluster around the approximately efficient size, with a relatively low variance. They conclude that the majority of farms were medium sized and that these were more productive than either small or large farms. Medium sized farms were more productive than smaller farms due to economies of scale. They were also more productive than larger farms, which faced the problem of moral hazard due to their reliance on hired labour. The authors then examine the reasons behind the approximate-optimality of farm size, focussing on the role of land markets and institutions, such as a strong system of property rights; well developed credit markets; and an extensive system of private and state-run insurance mechanisms. Finally, the paper examines rural labour markets. The authors conclude that these may have been less efficient than other markets, as the evidence suggests that there was too little rural to urban migration, given relative wages at the time.

The fourth paper, Duol Kim, ‘The Great Divergence on the Korean Peninsula, 1910-2020’ examines GDP growth in North and South Korea over the ‘long-twentieth’ century. North Korea was the early industrialiser and by 1930 was substantially wealthier than the South. When Joan Robinson referred to the ‘Korean Miracle’, she meant the economic advance of North Korea. This advantage continued into the 1960s. In the 1970s, the two Koreas experienced the “big cross” with the economy of the South overtaking the North. From the 1970s onwards, the South has experienced high rates of growth, interrupted only by the 1997 Asian currency crisis, and the North has stagnated and even lost ground. In 2019, GDP per capita in the South was over 25 times that of the North. The paper also examines the reasons behind the Korean reversal, particularly focussing on the contrast between the South’s strategy of developing exports and the North’s strategy of inward-looking development and military build-up.

The fifth paper, Panarat Anamwathana and Jessica Vechbanyongratana, ‘The Economic History of Thailand: Old Debates, Recent Advances, and Future Prospects’ examines the three of the big questions of Thai economic history: the reasons for Thailand comparatively slow economic growth prior to the late twentieth century, the slow rate of rural to urban migration, and the failure of the Thai government to invest in irrigation projects. In addition, the article looks at some of the challenges facing scholars in undertaking Thai economic history. Thai records have long been difficult to access, and digitisation of key records has only recently begun. Moreover, unlike neighbouring countries, Thailand was never colonised, and thus most records are in Thai and are thus inaccessible to most wester scholars.

The final paper, Jiwei Qian and Tuan-Hwee Sng, ‘The State in Chinese Economic History’ provides a chronological and thematic evaluation of the role of the state in China through the 1980s. The paper shows that, even though China is the oldest continually existing state in the world, prior to the Communist takeover in 1949, the state comprised a relatively small share of overall economic activity. In contrast to Europe, which had many small but relatively powerful states, China had a unitary but more limited state with low taxation rates and little or no official presence in remote areas. State capacity even declined during the late-dynastic period. This decline was reversed and the role of the state grew during the Republican and particularly the Communist periods. During the past century, the state has played an increasing role in controlling external and internal military threats and promoting industrialisation. The paper also examines the reasons behind the role of the Chinese state, exploring the roles of culture, institutions, and geography.

The authors of these papers are all leading scholars of Asian economic history; most are based in the country which they are writing about. Their contributions signal the vibrancy and high quality of economic history research in the Asia-Pacific region. The collective impact of these papers will be to help frame and facilitate the next generation of Asia-Pacific economic history. As guest editors we are pleased to present these contributions which highlight the Asia-Pacific reach of the *Australian Economic History Review* and the potential for further collaboration between the two societies over their shared interest in Asian economic history.