

Comments on “Horsemen of the
Apocalypse: The Mongol Empire and the
Great Divergence” by Rafael Torres-Gaviria

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SUMMARY OF THE PAPER

- CLAIMS
- Mongol conquests of C13th were fundamental cause of Great Divergence
- Violence contracted capital and population, reducing p.c. incomes in places invaded by Mongols (including China)
- Trade increased p.c. incomes in countries in Goldilocks Zone, close enough to trade with Mongols but too far away to be invaded, (including Western Europe)
- Despite short life of Mongol Empire, its effects persisted until C19th

CHINA vs WESTERN EUROPE

- Distance plays a key role: China was invaded because it was near Mongol heartlands and Western Europe was not invaded because it was too far away
- CHINA: suffered huge loss of population and capital as a result of Mongol violence, so suffered decline in p.c. wealth & income which more than offset positive effects of trade
- This negative shock condemned China to stagnation for 6 centuries
- WESTERN EUROPE: didn't suffer from Mongol violence because it was too far away, but did suffer huge loss of population because of Black Death, which led to rise in p.c. wealth and income, reinforced by positive trade effects
- This led to West European take-off to MEG 6 centuries later

ASSESSMENT

- Very little is known about economic history of the Mongol Empire, so this is a very welcome project
- I nevertheless have some reservations about the boldness of the claims
- My remarks will focus on the following:
 - (1) Role of distance
 - (2) Persistence and the compression of history
 - (3) Regional variation
 - (4) Later experience with empires
 - (5) Other issues

(1) ROLE OF DISTANCE

- Why did Mongols not invade Western Europe? This paper suggests it was due to distance, but an alternative interpretation is that it was due to Western Europe's ability to defend itself
- Causality would then go the other way round. Western Europe's organisational strength would explain why the Mongols were stopped on edge of Western Europe, which then continued on a trajectory leading to MEG

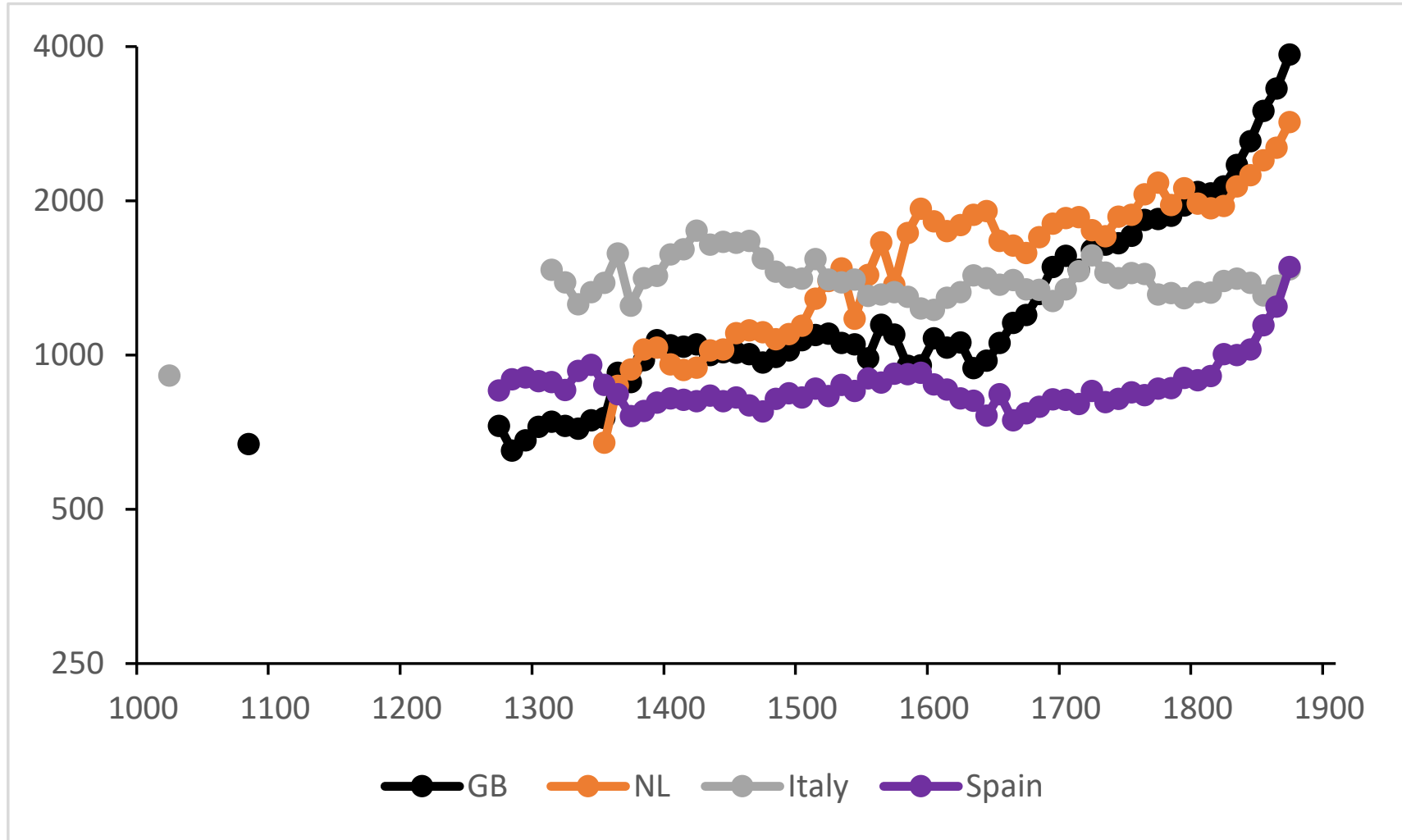
(2) PERSISTENCE AND THE COMPRESSION OF HISTORY

- A lot happened in Western Europe between 13th and 19th centuries:
 - Black Death (which shouldn't be conflated with Mongol invasions)
 - Renaissance
 - Reconnaissance (voyages of discovery)
 - Reformation
 - Glorious Revolution
 - Scientific Revolution
 - Enlightenment
- Can they all be seen as the inevitable result of the Mongol Empire?

(3) REGIONAL VARIATION

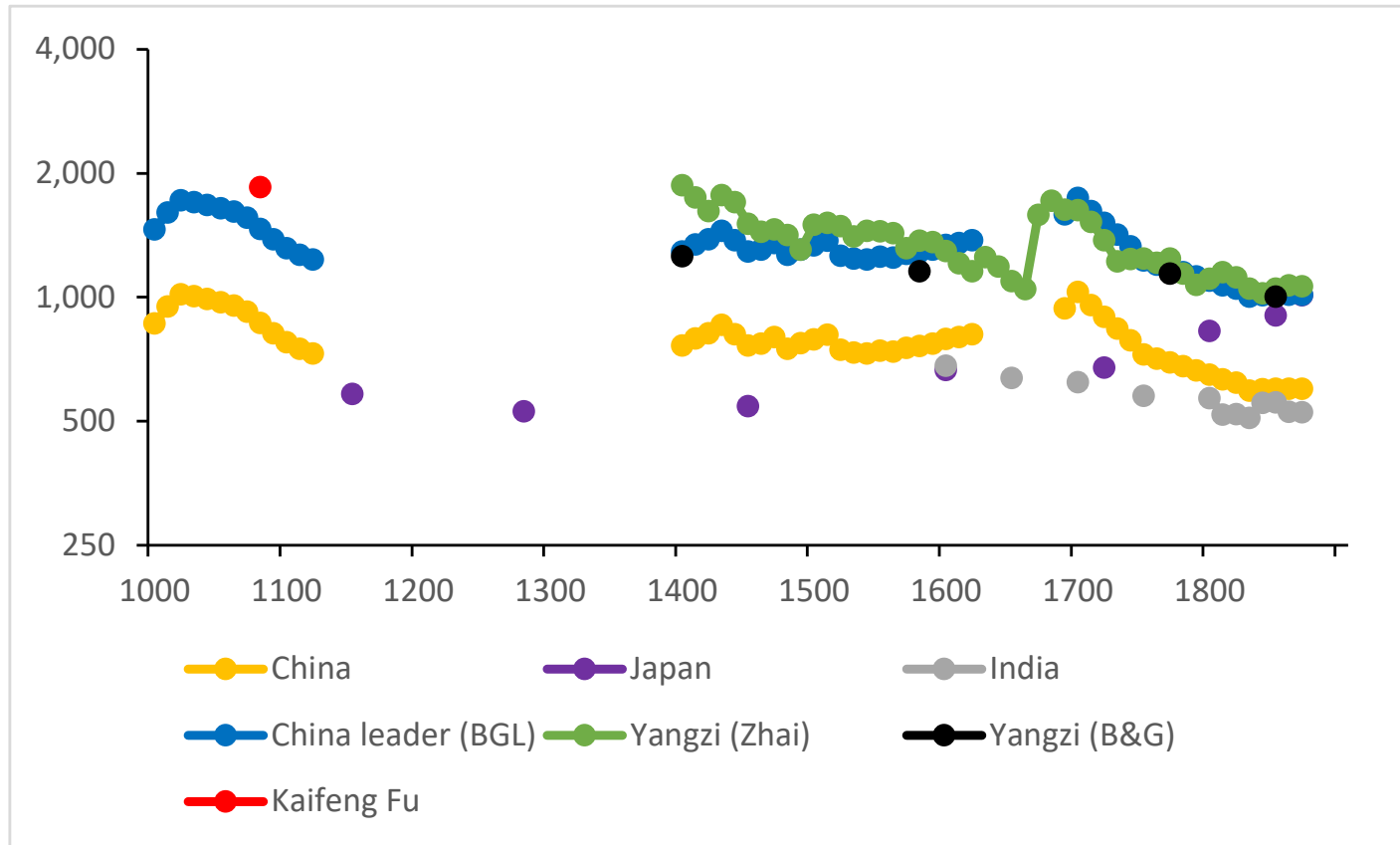
- Central issue is rise of Western Europe and decline of China, but this doesn't deal adequately with a central issue in the Great Divergence debate: regional variation within as well as between continents and nations
- Great Divergence followed earlier Little Divergences in Europe and Asia, which occurred on a north-south rather than east-west axis, not easily explained by distance from Mongol Empire
- Europe: north Europe overtook south Europe
- Asia: south China overtook north China

European Little Divergence (GDP p.c. in \$1990)



- GB and NL overtook Italy and Spain

Asian Little Divergence (GDP p.c. in \$1990)



- Kaifeng Fu (northern) was China leader during Northern Song, Yangzi Delta (southern) from Ming
- Japan declined during C13th without Mongol invasion
- Japan also overtook China during C18th

(4) LATER EXPERIENCE WITH EMPIRES

- SPANISH EMPIRE
- The Americas were very far away from Iberia but were invaded, population declined catastrophically and capital was plundered, so distance was no protector
- France was very close but wasn't invaded. Was the ability to defend yourself more important than distance?
- Nearby Netherlands were brought under Spanish control from C15th but quickly became European p.c. leaders after rebellion in 1570s, so adverse effects of Spanish mismanagement were not very persistent

Later experience with empires

- BRITISH EMPIRE
- Again distance doesn't seem to work in the ways suggested here
- In C18th India was conquered despite being a long way from GB. Same with Australia and much of Africa later on
- But GB kept out of nearby Europe
- Ability of territories to defend themselves more important than distance

(5) OTHER ISSUES

- Is core-periphery trade always good for growth on the periphery? What about suggestions of unfair terms of trade, particularly in case of empire?
- Mongol invasions and Black Death are often grouped together here as if they were the same thing. But Black Death left capital intact whereas Mongol violence destroyed capital, with very different effects on p.c. wealth and incomes

Other issues

- Population is taken as indicator of economic performance by appeal to Malthusian model. But there is much evidence to support a Smithian rather than Malthusian interpretation of pre-1800 economic performance
- At any point in time there was always a maximum population size (carrying capacity) determined by technology, but that is not the same as saying the world was Malthusian
- That requires examining relations between living standards and fertility/mortality