Foreword

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A new phase of scholarship starts when an accepted generalization is placed under serious review. The specialists may then confirm some of its applications but they also start to point out anomalies, the instances when the evidence does not fit very well. In its broadest sense the proposition scrutinized in this volume is that spells of political fragmentation in the pre-modern world had very large consequences indeed. The suggestion is that they were accompanied by, and in some measure actually occasioned, a broad range of episodes of cultural creativity, innovation both technological and commercial, and economic growth. This hypothesis, originally drawn from the European case, is examined here by scholars whose careers have become virtually synonymous with the interpretation of historical experience in China, Japan, India and the Islamic world. The volume nevertheless carries on beyond mere second-phase work. The comparative histories that it contains clarify a number of issues and enable us to derive a programme for the next stage of research.

The volume’s central notion is labelled by its editors, the Hume–Kant hypothesis. The writings of Hume and Kant, taken together, urge that competition among countries is not only economically beneficial but vital to preserve liberty. However those of us who started to argue along these lines a generation ago seldom referred to predecessors like Hume or Kant. Certainly I never came across the relevant passages in their works, let alone those in Gibbon’s Decline and Fall. We rediscovered the wheel for ourselves, so to speak. What we added – the sidelight we thought illuminated the core idea – was the suggestion that political systems in Asia were too centralized to reap the benefits secured in Europe.

This extrapolation outside Europe took as its reference point Western writings that portrayed Asian histories as sagas of empire. Perhaps we did not understand that by the 1980s traditional European and American scholarship about the non-Western world was wearing out; old stereotypes were on the brink of being replaced by more generous and complex visions. Asian specialists were soon highlighting phases when unitary empires were absent from that continent and identifying the spells of political fragmentation that had occurred there. The original hypothesis implied that such periods would have
been marked by creativity as in Europe, though in reality perhaps less continuously or cumulatively. This extension of Hume–Kant is what the present volume uses modern research to test.

The founding generalization invokes a competitive model of cultural, political and economic change. The notion that fragmentation and innovation are connected was of course never meant to account for every historical detail. Those of us who employed the concept always intended it as a sketch rather than a portrait. It is obviously an ideal type of explanation that seeks primarily to indicate the direction of change. In order to fit the complexities even of European experience, the central notion requires various modifications. We also noted that interstate competition by itself did not fully explain economic development. For instance, a technological threshold probably had to be crossed to bring about economic advance on the scale seen in Western Europe by the start of the nineteenth century.

‘Test’ is the appropriate word for the exercise presented here: interesting quantitative data on cultural creativity are offered and considered. In the event, scholars do not always agree about either the facts of the Asian record or the validity of the argument. While some find the hypothesis useful, others read the histories of their chosen regions more sceptically. Individual Asian histories seem set on divergent paths. As a result, the story seems to blur and this appears to render the link between political fragmentation and innovation indeterminate. On the face of it, we are plunged back into a familiar but unexciting type of history where precision supersedes inspiration, much is contingent, and little by way of an underlying logic can be detected.

At this point it may seem that the message of the volume is negative, leaving us uncertain about the generality of the original idea yet at the same time without a clear alternative. Nevertheless beneath the surface disagreements and the caveats advanced by students of one country or another, a pattern does begin to emerge that suggests amending rather than abandoning the hypothesis. This new notion is more qualified than before, which is only to be expected when so much additional knowledge about intricate, historically ill-recorded circumstances is brought to bear. But the possibility of a new relationship between fragmentation and creativity should inspire the next round of investigation.

Consider what emerges. It is that the creativity and innovation expected of periods of fragmentation, and clearly to be found in many of them, can sometimes be suppressed, so that the relationship as a whole threatens to become misty. In Japan, the workings of Hume–Kant may have been denied for long periods by internal warfare. In India (accounts differ) a blanketing cosmological choice may have brought Hume–Kant forth stillborn. In the Islamic world the relationship may have been prevented from flowering by a homogeneous legal system.
What does this imply? It implies that political fragmentation *tout court* was not sufficient to induce growth; the historical pattern of Hume–Kant operated only within an ‘optimality band’. When a political system veered outside the band in one direction, towards overmuch central control, creativity was restricted. This much may be deduced from the original proposition and is documented here. On the other hand, where political fragmentation corresponded with the opposite circumstances of instability and warfare, creativity may have been unable to flourish – or if it did, it may not have ripened into full innovation. The histories of the political systems under review (five of them if we include Europe) exhibit from time to time and place to place every kind of disturbance and repression, every disability as far as innovation is concerned.

Nevertheless when there was relative stability among competing states, there were often creative bursts in Asia as there were in Europe. What one author refers to as the ‘barely adolescent state of our knowledge’ means that there is more to do before the Hume–Kant thesis can be fully defined in an Asian context. How long the effects typically take before revealing themselves is one aspect that needs more investigation. In the event, this volume offers a fruitful way forward. It helps to specify more precisely the range of conditions under which decentralized political arrangements conduce to economic development.