

# Call for Sessions - WEHC 2015 [S20146]

---

## **Proposed title of the session**

The Historical Origins of Economic Development: A Comparative Perspective

## **Abstract**

Why are some countries rich and others poor? Did those that were poor in the distant past have their fortunes reversed, or has the historical income gap persisted to this day? On the basis of a growing body of cross-country evidence, a consensus has emerged suggesting that some historical roots deeply embedded in the distant past (e.g. ancestral composition) can affect economic prosperity today. In particular, one such “deep root” pertains to genetic distance or historically transmitted traits measured by the time since two populations last shared a common ancestor. These traits may act as a barrier to the diffusion of productivity-enhancing innovations across populations, thereby affecting economic development over the very long run.

By drawing upon the empirical analyses of Europe, Africa, and Asia (China specifically), this session seeks to expedite empirical efforts in understanding the long-term effects of genealogical relatedness and how it may account for the historical divergence of income and other economic behavior—both historically and in the present.

The panel presentations will focus on new works that examine the economic outcomes of measurable “historical origins”.

Enrico Spolaore and Romain Wacziarg—the two pioneers in the study of genetic distance—investigate the historical dynamics of fertility decline in Europe and its relation to measures of cultural and ancestral distance. Specifically, they set out to test the hypothesis that the decline of fertility was associated with the diffusion of social and behavioral changes from France, in contrast with the spread of the Industrial Revolution, where England played a leading role.

Using ancestral lifeway in sub-Saharan Africa as the key predictor, Stelios Michalopoulos assesses, empirically, its impact on today’s individual economic outcomes.

By constructing a historical measure of genetic distance based on Chinese surnames, Ying Bai and James Kung test the hypothesis that genetic distance had a barrier effect on the diffusion of technology—using the adoption of a New World crop and the steam engine as proxies—in the historical context of China.

By linking the number of imperial exam degree holders in China during 1368-1905 to contemporary educational norms and aspirations today, Ting Chen, James Kung, and Chicheng Ma attempt to find out how China’s millennium-old civil exam system has shaped human capital achievements under China’s present education system.

Last but not least, by decomposing human capital into worker skills and knowledge elites, Mara Squicciarini and Nico Voigtlander show how the latter, while unimportant during the pre-industrial era, became the main driver of economic growth during the Industrial Revolution. In doing so they provide a fresh perspective to the view that accords a peripheral role to human capital during the Industrial Revolution.

As an emerging subfield in development economics and economic history, we expect this group to attract substantial attention especially from those who seek to understand the underlying dynamics of long-term economic development not just from an institutional perspective but also from a cultural one.

---

## **I. Corresponding Session Organiser**

Prof. James Kai-sing Kung (The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology [China])

---

## **II. Co-Organiser(s)**

1. Corresponding Organiser.

---

## **III. Expected Participant(s)**

1. same as correspondent.
2. Enrico Spolaore (Tufts University [United States of America])
3. Nico Voigtlaender (University of California, Los Angeles [United States of America])
4. Stelios Michalopoulos (Brown University [United States of America])