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Comparative history as comparative advantage:
China's potential contribution to the study of ancient Mediterranean history

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Abstract: This paper argues that Chinese historians of the Greco-Roman world can and should make a significant contribution to this field by promoting the comparative analysis of ancient civilizations in eastern and western Eurasia.

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The Third International Conference on Ancient History of 2005 was conceived as a means to open a dialogue between Chinese and western scholars working on the history of the ancient Mediterranean and the Near East, and to afford Chinese scholars an opportunity to present their work to an international audience. Chinese participation was strong: the official program lists thirty papers by contributors from China (three of them currently based in the United States) and another thirty from Europe and the United States, as well as two from Japan.¹ The overwhelming majority of these papers dealt with issues of ‘western’ ancient history without explicit reference to the early history of China. Only a few presentations – eight altogether, or thirteen per cent – were explicitly comparative or cross-cultural in nature. This reluctance to engage more vigorously in comparative history strikes me as unfortunate, given that both western and – especially – Chinese scholars stand to make significant contributions in this area. In this paper, I argue that for pragmatic as well as intellectual reasons, a comparative approach ought to be a priority for Chinese scholarship on the ancient world.

Academics in the People’s Republic of China who wish to further our understanding of the ancient history of western Eurasia continue to face considerable obstacles. The most serious problem is that the study of the Greco-Roman world in particular is now a highly mature field. According to my own recent survey of the main bibliographical tool in this field, the periodical *L’Année Philologique*, publications in Classics numbered approximately 750,000 between 1924 to 1992, and probably amount to around one million overall.² Every year, out of 18,000 publications in Classics, over 4,000 titles appear under the rubric of ‘ancient history’, accompanied by many more publications with a historical dimension. To this we must add the smaller but highly technical literature in Egyptology, Sumerology, Assyriology, Hittitology, Jewish Studies, and Iranian Studies, to name just the main branches of Early Near Eastern scholarship. Professional engagement with this enormous body of scholarship requires familiarity with a whole range of languages – my breakdown shows that English, German, French and Italian are of broadly equivalent importance, cumulatively accounting for some ninety to ninety-five per cent of all recent publications –, as well as access to substantial holdings of books and journals. The list of journals covered by *L’Année Philologique* now includes about 1,000 periodicals, several hundred of which are of immediate relevance to ancient historians. Another survey that I undertook a few years ago, analyzing the background of ancient historians who held academic positions in anglophone countries in the late 1990s, yielded a total of 630 university-employed specialists in Greek and Roman history alone.³ All this gives western scholarship a huge comparative advantage over newcomers that even substantial investments in the Chinese academic infrastructure are unlikely to reduce to any significant degree. Furthermore, the

This paper has been prepared for a volume of papers based on the conference mentioned in the first footnote. I am grateful to Prof. Huang Yang (Fudan University, Shanghai) for the invitation to participate in this meeting.

¹ *3rd International conference on ancient history, Fudan University, Shanghai, 17-21 August 2005: Proceedings.*

² W. Scheidel, ‘Continuity and change in classical scholarship: a quantitative survey, 1924-1992’, *Ancient Society* 28 (1997), 265-289.

³ W. Scheidel, ‘Professional historians of classical antiquity in the English-speaking world: a quantitative survey’, *Ancient History Bulletin* 13 (1999), 151-156.

persistent intellectual stagnation of much of ancient history must make us wonder whether the emulation of the conventional efforts of most western scholars – by aiming to produce work in the same mould – should in fact be regarded as a desirable objective, let alone as the most promising way forward.

The practice of ancient history in Japan provides a real-life test case. Thanks to its post-war economic and political development, Japanese institutions of higher learning have been able to commit substantial funds to the acquisition of bibliographical resources in this field. At the same time, the ancient history of western Eurasia and North Africa has continued to occupy a rather marginal position in that country, at least compared to western academia. This places Japan in an intermediate position between the main western countries, with their thousands of academic positions, graduate programs, and historically grown libraries with relevant books numbering in the tens of thousands on the one hand, and China, with its emergent commitment to the study of foreign ancient history on the other. In a sense, one could say that ancient history in Japan is now where ancient history in China might one day be. This makes a closer look at Japan's overall contribution to the development of the discipline all the more interesting. This task is greatly facilitated by a comprehensive bibliography of work on the ancient Mediterranean and Near East produced by Japanese scholars in the twentieth century, published as a double issue of the journal *Kodai* in 2001/02.⁴ This collection enumerates some 3,500 titles, half of them on the ancient Near East, an area in which Japanese scholarship has indeed made its mark in the international arena, and half on Greece and Rome. However, only thirty of the latter, or 1.7 per cent, were published in western languages, and more than half of those (eighteen) in a single conference volume.⁵ This has seriously curtailed the impact of this work on scholarship outside Japan.

Emergent Chinese scholarship faces a considerable risk of being trapped in a similarly marginal position. This trend is already in evidence in the survey of Roman studies in China prepared by Naixin Wang in 2002, which shows a similar picture of predominantly Chinese-language scholarship for domestic consumption.⁶ To be sure, this is not to say that up-to-date presentations of Greco-Roman history for a Chinese readership is not a valid and indeed necessary endeavor: however, for present purposes, we are concerned in the first instance with China's potential to produce genuinely original research and participate meaningfully in international debates within this field. This is particularly relevant because ancient history, or Classics in general, has traditionally been a 'globalized' area of study that transcends national and linguistic boundaries, but has at the same time been permeated (and often sustained) by a strong eurocentric bias. More substantial contributions by East Asian scholars would not only enhance their own standing but also help to widen the ambit and horizons of the field as a whole.

⁴ 'Bibliography: The ancient Mediterranean world. Studies by Japanese scholars in the 20th century', *Kodai* 11/12 (2001/02). I am grateful to Prof. Ryoji Motomura for a copy of this issue.

⁵ T. Yuge and M. Doi (eds.), *Forms of control and subordination in antiquity* (Leiden, 1988). Several others appeared in the Japanese journal *Kodai*, which is not well represented in western libraries.

⁶ N. Wang, 'A survey of Roman studies in China', *Kleos* 7 (2002), 319-334. I am grateful to Prof. Naixin Wang for a copy of this article.

This is why China's comparative advantage merits especial attention: its great potential to contribute to comparative world history. Comparative history has many benefits. In the most general terms, it makes it possible to distinguish historically common features from culturally specific or unique characteristics and developments, helps us to identify variables that were critical to particular historical outcomes, and allows us to assess the nature of a given system in the broader context of structurally similar entities (such as, for example, all city-state cultures or all agrarian empires). Comparisons may be employed in order to evaluate empirical evidence in relation to a predictive theory. This approach aims for the testing of general sociological principles or what have been called 'robust processes': the search for configurations of conditions that produce particular outcomes. A second major category of comparative historical research is sometimes labeled 'analytical comparison' or 'contrast of contexts'. This method focuses on comparisons between equivalent units for the purpose of identifying independent variables that help explain shared or contrasting patterns and occurrences. It applies comparisons to bring out the unique features of particular cases to show how these features shape more general social processes. Themes and questions serve as a framework for pointing out differences between cases. This approach helps to preserve the historical integrity of each case, and ultimately aims to define features of one system more sharply by comparison with conceptually or functionally equivalent features in another system.⁷ Put more simply, we cannot really hope to understand developments in one system – say, the Roman empire, or the Han empire – unless we have some appreciation of how things turned out in broadly analogous cases: without comparisons, we can never know if particular outcomes were common or rare, and which variables were endowed with causative agency. To some extent, the historical study of a single case – a single empire, in our case – can only result in the antiquarian accumulation of data and untestable and therefore inherently arbitrary claims about significance and causality.

The early history of China and the Mediterranean is marked by initial convergence followed by ultimate divergence. In the first two centuries CE, for the first time in history, two states controlled up to one-half of the human species: the Roman empire in the west and the Han empire in the east. At the most basic level of resolution, the circumstances of their creation were not very different. In the east, the Shang and Western Zhou periods created a shared cultural framework for the Warring States, with the gradual consolidation of numerous small polities into a handful of large kingdoms which were finally united by the westernmost marcher state of Qin. In the Mediterranean, we can observe comparable political fragmentation and gradual expansion of a unifying civilization, in this case Greek, followed by the gradual formation of a handful of major Warring States (the Hellenistic kingdoms in the east, Rome-Italy, Syracuse and Carthage in the west), and likewise eventual unification by the westernmost marcher state, the Roman-led Italian confederation.

By contrast, the most substantial differences occurred both before and after this period of convergent consolidation. *Before*, in that Mediterranean state formation was secondary

⁷ E. V. Bonnell, 'The uses of theory, concepts and comparison in historical sociology', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980), 156-173; T. Skocpol and M. Somers, 'The uses of comparative history in macrosocial inquiry', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980), 174-197.

to, and to some extent parasitical upon, much older traditions in the Fertile Crescent, where the first empire, Akkad, predated the Roman empire by 2,000 years. The Shang-Western Zhou tradition notwithstanding, China lacked any such precursors, and exemplifies primary imperial state formation on a grand scale. And *after*, with regard to the final fates of these two ancient super-empires. It is true that initially, destabilization occurred again in strikingly similar ways: both empires came to be divided into two halves, one that contained the original core but was more exposed to the main ‘barbarian’ periphery (the west in the Roman case, the north in China), and a traditionalist half in the east (Rome) and south (China). The more exposed halves experienced fragmentation into a small number of sizeable successor states that came under foreign leadership but retained imperial institutions. Eventually, however, their paths diverged quite significantly. In China, disunity lasted from the 310s to 589 CE, a bit over a quarter of a millennium, until the Sui regime achieved re-unification. This event spawned a series of regimes that have since maintained territorial cohesion with only relatively brief spells of fragmentation in the tenth, twelfth/thirteenth, and twentieth centuries. In western Eurasia, an attempt to bring about unification some 140 years after the formal division of the Roman empire in 395 CE was partly successful: in demographic terms, perhaps half of the core of the former western empire was recovered by the Eastern Roman empire, but was soon lost again, and this time for good. In the following century, the Arab invasions reduced the Eastern empire to a small fraction of its former size. In the West, Roman imperial institutions were gradually eroded during the second half of the first millennium CE, resulting in pervasive political fragmentation that reached a nadir around 1000 CE. In the eastern and southern Mediterranean, by contrast, imperial traditions were maintained by a series of Islamic regimes from the Umayyads to the Ottomans, for the most part up to 1918. Thus, the sixth and seventh centuries CE witnessed what I propose to call the ‘First Great Divergence’ between the eastern and western ends of the Eurasian land mass, when the first of several reunifications of China succeeded and that of the Roman empire failed. For the following 1400 years, this divergence created a lasting bifurcation and divergent tracks of path dependence: while the tradition of universal world empire continued to thrive in China, it survived only in diminished form in the eastern part of the former Roman empire, and *de facto* – if not ideationally – vanished from much of Europe. The long-term impact of this development on world history – and ultimately on the much more debated (second) ‘Great Divergence’ between modern growth in Europe and stagnation in later imperial China – has barely begun to be considered by contemporary scholarship.⁸

Overall, systematic comparisons between the Greco-Roman world and ancient China have been extremely rare (both in absolute terms and relative to the total amount of scholarship in either field), and moreover almost exclusively confined to the sphere of intellectual and philosophical history. Over the last few years, a number of studies have focused on the nature of moral and scientific thought in Greece and China. The most

⁸ For this concept, see K. Pomeranz *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton, 2000). The literature on this topic is substantial and rapidly expanding. By contrast, the ‘First Great Divergence’ has yet to be properly conceptualized in history and historical sociology. I address this issue in forthcoming work.

active proponent of this line of inquiry has been Geoffrey Lloyd, with five books to date.⁹ Further efforts in the same area have been undertaken by a number of other scholars.¹⁰ However, there are no comparable studies of Roman and Chinese ‘high culture’, and, more importantly, virtually no similarly detailed comparative work on the political, social, economic or legal history of Hellenistic, Roman, and ancient Chinese empires.¹¹ For the first time, the Stanford-based ‘Ancient Chinese and Mediterranean Empires Comparative History Project’ now seeks to put the comparative study of these areas on a more solid basis. An initial conference that brought together experts on ancient Chinese, Hellenistic, and Roman history will result in a collaborative volume centered on key aspects of state formation.¹² Further research will follow, and it is hoped that this approach will eventually be more widely adopted.

This is where China’s comparative advantage comes into play. Comparative history is challenging at the best of times, as it requires practitioners to draw on evidence and secondary scholarship across the manifold narrow boundaries that so effectively

⁹ G. Lloyd, *Adversaries and authorities: investigations into ancient Greek and Chinese science* (Cambridge, 1996); G. Lloyd and N. Sivin, *The way and the word: science and medicine in early China and Greece* (New Haven, 2002); G. Lloyd, *The ambitions of curiosity: understanding the world in ancient Greece and China* (Cambridge, 2003), *Ancient worlds, modern reflections: philosophical perspectives on Greek and Chinese science and culture* (Oxford, 2004), and *The delusions of invulnerability: wisdom and morality in ancient Greece, China and today* (London, 2005).

¹⁰ L. A. Raphaels, *Knowing words: wisdom and cunning in the classical tradition of China and Greece* (Ithaca, 1992); D. L. Hall and R. T. Ames, *Anticipating China: thinking through the narratives of Chinese and Western culture* (Albany, 1995) and *Thinking from the Han: self, truth, and transcendence in Chinese and Western culture* (Albany, 1998); X. Lu, *Rhetoric in ancient China, fifth to third century B.C.E.: a comparison with classical Greek rhetoric* (Columbia, 1998); S. Kuriyama, *The expressiveness of the body and the divergence of Greek and Chinese medicine* (New York, 1999); D. Schaberg, ‘Travel, geography, and the imperial imagination in fifth-century Athens and Han China’, *Comparative Literature* 51 (1999), 152-191; S. Shankman and S. W. Durrant, *The siren and the sage: knowledge and wisdom in ancient Greece and China* (Albany, 2000) and *Early China/Ancient Greece: thinking through comparisons* (Albany, 2002); F.-H. Mutschler, ‘Zu Sinnhorizont und Funktion griechischer, römischer und altchinesischer Geschichtsschreibung’, in *Sinn (in) der Antike* (Mainz, 2003), 33-54; J.-P. Reding, *Comparative essays in early Greek and Chinese rational thinking* (Aldershot, 2004). Cf. also M.-C. Poo, *Enemies of civilization: attitudes toward foreigners in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China* (Albany, 2005).

¹¹ Hsing I-Tien, ‘Rome and China: the role of the armies in the imperial succession: a comparative study’ (PhD thesis, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1980), an unpublished thesis, seems to be the main exception in a western language; cf. also G. Lorenz, ‘Das Imperium Romanum und das China der Han-Dynastie: Gedanken und Materialien zu einem Vergleich’, *Informationen für Geschichtslehrer* 12 (1990), 9-60, and R. Motomura, ‘An approach towards a comparative study of the Roman empire and the Ch’in and Han empires’, *Kodai* 2 (1991), 61-69, and now S. A. M. Adshead, *China in world history* (3rd ed. New York, 2000), 4-21 and *T’ang China: the rise of the East in world history* (Basingstoke, 2004), 20-29, and M. H. Dettenhofer, ‘Das römische Imperium und das China der Han-Zeit: Ansätze zu einer historischen Komparatistik’, *Latomus* 65 (2006, in press), for brief comparisons of the Roman and Han empires. A recent conference focused on literary and ideological constructions of the Qin-Han and Roman empires: conceiving the “empire”: ancient China and Rome – an intercultural comparison in dialogue’ (Essen, April 20-23, 2005). V. T.-b. Hui, *War and state formation in ancient China and early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2005) ranges beyond antiquity.

¹² ‘Institutions of empire: comparative perspectives on ancient Chinese and Mediterranean history’ (Stanford University, May 13-14, 2005); W. Scheidel (ed.), *Rome and China: comparative perspectives on ancient world empires* (forthcoming).

compartmentalize historical training and research. Yet even by these standards, comparative analysis that involves early China proves unusually demanding. The double language barrier – for both ancient sources and modern scholarship – makes it very difficult for western non-experts to acquire more than the most superficial familiarity with the pertinent body of knowledge. The persistent shortage of translations even of principal early texts greatly exacerbates this problem. While Sima Qian's *Shiji* has by now been almost (but not quite) completely translated into western languages, two-thirds of the chapters of the *Hanshu* remain untranslated, as well as the entire *Hou Hanshu* and much of the later *Zizhi tongjian*. Less prominent works are often completely inaccessible to outsiders, and the same is true of the vast number of Qin and Han documents preserved on bamboo strips and wooden tablets which shed light on administrative practices and various other facets of daily life, as well as of early stone inscriptions.¹³ This puts western scholars who attempt to utilize ancient Chinese evidence at a considerable disadvantage relative to Chinese scholars wishing to access Greco-Roman sources, which tend to be much more widely available in modern translation than early Chinese texts. Publication of secondary scholarship in Chinese and Japanese creates additional linguistic obstacles. Recent advances in archaeology are particularly hard to gauge for anyone who lacks close connections to Chinese researchers: even published material is available in the first instance merely in the form of brief abstracts in English.¹⁴ At western universities, access to these resources is de facto controlled by a small number of experts in early Chinese language, literature and material culture who are greatly outnumbered by scholars working on the Greco-Roman world and few of whom appear to be interested in explicitly comparative perspectives.

This bottleneck between the huge wealth of historical information about early China on the one hand and most students of western antiquity on the other puts Chinese scholars in a unique position to contribute to comparative study. Instead of striving to align their research with dominant scholarship in the West which is already bloated in volume and constrained by diminishing intellectual returns on conventionally self-contained (i.e., 'classical'-Mediterranean) lines of inquiry, Chinese historians of the ancient world ought to make the most of this exciting opportunity to be at the forefront of a much-needed conceptual expansion and re-orientation of their field. Thanks to native language skills and better access to domestic sources of pertinent information, they incur far smaller costs in incorporating Chinese history into their work on the earliest western civilizations than their European and American peers, and stand to reap considerable benefits. If China has any realistic hope of making a notable contribution to Greco-Roman or more generally ancient world history, it will be in the area of comparative study. In recent years, the People's Republic has made enormous strides by exploiting its comparative advantage in the world economy. The same approach can profitably be applied to the field of ancient history. Among ancient historians, comparative history is China's unique comparative advantage. Chinese scholars should make the most of it.

¹³ E. Wilkinson, *Chinese history: a manual* (revised and enlarged edition, Cambridge MA, 2000), esp. 780-807, 812.

¹⁴ *China Archaeology and Art Digest* 1- (1996-).