

Introduction

Two speeches, recorded in what are among the earliest historical texts of the Greco-Roman and Chinese traditions, introduce fundamental themes of this book. The first is from the *Histories of Herodotus* (c. 484–425 BC) and appears in a conversation between Spartans and Athenians, where the Spartans are seeking assurance that the Athenians do not abandon the Greek alliance against the invading Persian Empire. The Athenians explain the reasons why an alliance with the barbarians is unthinkable. They first refer to the fact that the Persians had burned and destroyed hallowed temples to the Greek gods and that this crime must be avenged. They then proceed to explain that their shared Greek identity also precludes their abandonment of the Greek cause in favor of the Persian one:

αὖθις δὲ τὸ Ἑλληνικόν, ἐὼν ὁμαιμόν τε καὶ ὁμόγλωσσον, καὶ θεῶν ἱδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι ἡθεὰ τε ὁμότροπα, τῶν προδότας γενέσθαι Ἀθηναίους οὐκ ἂν εὖ ἔχοι.¹

[there is the fact that we share] what it is to be “Greek”: the same blood and language, common temples and sacrificial rites to the gods, and the same customs. It would not be well for the Athenians to be traitors to these things.

This passage is a cornerstone in modern discussions of Greek identity in the fifth century BC as well as of ways in which ethnicity was perceived and constructed in the classical world. In this case, the Athenians clearly mark what distinguishes not only themselves but also the greater Hellenic community from the “barbarians,” a blanket term for those parts of humanity that share neither Greek cultural practices nor relations of shared kinship.

The second quotation is taken from the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, a pre-imperial Chinese text (usually dated to the fourth century BC) that is a commentary

¹ Hdt. 8.144.2. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

on the events chronicled in the *Chunqiu* 春秋, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The speech occurs in an episode where a chieftain of the Rong 戎 people, who had collaborated previously with the Chinese state of Jin 晉, has been excluded from a military council of his erstwhile Chinese ally. In response, the Rong chieftain says that

我諸戎飲食衣服不與華同，贄幣不通，言語不達，何惡之能為？不與於會，亦無薈焉？²

We Rong people have food, drink, and clothing that is different from that of the Chinese; our gifts and valuables are different; our languages are unintelligible to one another – what basis for doing harm do we have? If you do not grant that we come to the council, why should we feel upset about that?

In this case, we see a similar delineation drawn between communities. In the first example, what is Greek is defined in opposition to what is barbarian, implicitly in reference to the inhabitants of the Persian Empire. The quotation from the *Zuozhuan* is a speech from a chieftain of a people whose ethnonym would later become synonymous with a concept of “barbarian” in the Chinese tradition, where the speaker likewise marks the distinctions between his own community and the Chinese, or Hua 華 as they are referred to here. In each case, the Greek and Chinese cultural spheres, neither yet unified into a single political body and whose written traditions would shape the discourse of political, cultural, and ethnic identity in the later imperial traditions of the Chinese and Roman empires, exhibit an analogous tendency to define the Self in opposition to an Other, to mark out those features of one’s own community that distinguish it from that of another people.

These quotations are taken from two of the earliest manifestations of wholly independent historiographical traditions. The former, Herodotus, is generally regarded as the father of Greek historiography, and the *Zuozhuan*, though still in what may be considered a developmental stage (the “father of Chinese history” not appearing until the late second century BC in the person of Sima Qian 司馬遷), is nevertheless a foundational text in the Chinese historiographical tradition. Yet these two speeches share a fundamental feature in common in that they exhibit some of the earliest articulations of the discourse of alterity and identity that would persist in various literary genres under succeeding empires.

² *Zuozhuan*, Xianggong 襄公.14.1007.

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Centuries later, historians in the sixth and seventh centuries AD in the Greco-Roman and Chinese worlds would, in many ways, follow generic models established nearly one thousand years earlier. In particular, the bodies of ethnological discourse that historians in this later period inherited had been established in earlier centuries when the barbarians had belonged to the periphery – if not always geographically then at least culturally. However, the fall of the Western Roman and Han 漢 Chinese empires over the course of the third to fifth centuries AD witnessed large movements of populations and the entrance of increasing numbers of border peoples into the empires on their own political terms, a process that led to dramatic political dislocation and fragmentation in either case. This period was perhaps of greater significance in Europe, as the multi-centered political landscape it ushered in became a new norm that has persisted up to the present day, despite the best efforts of would-be empire builders up into the twentieth century. Yet the conceptual toolbox with which historians had to work in this later period, the representational vocabulary and ways of perceiving and describing ethnic and cultural others that they had inherited from their classical predecessors, was remarkably inconsistent with the contemporary realities of these later historians.

For no longer were the barbarians relegated to the periphery: both Rome and China witnessed groups who identified, or were identified, as non-Roman and non-Chinese not only enter imperial territory but also set up their own independent political regimes within the former borders of the empire.³ The historian recording such unprecedented events was thus faced with the problem of renegotiating the parameters of his own political civilization. The period of ca. AD 300–600 is of additional significance because it witnessed a dramatically different outcome in the fates of Western Europe and China. By the year 600, the former remained composed of a number of successor kingdoms to the Roman Empire, whose populations would eventually be willing to subscribe to the identities of Frank, Lombard, Anglo-Saxon, or Visigoth. China, however, was reconstituted as a unified empire in the late sixth century, and, along the way, witnessed the virtual disappearance from the historical record of a number of ethnic groups (Xiongnu 匈奴, Sārbi-Xianbei 鮮卑, Jie 羯, Di

³ “China” and “Chinese” are of course anachronisms, but they will be employed here throughout both for the convenience of non-specialists as well as because of the lack of a single set of consistently applicable alternatives to refer to the cultural, linguistic, and political tradition that reaches from the present day back to the second millennium BC. On this point, see Brindley, “Barbarians or Not? Ethnicity and Changing Conceptions of the Ancient Yue (Viet) Peoples,” 2–4.

氏 and Qiang 羌⁴) that had established some of the most powerful states in the preceding period. What happened in China was as if the Roman Empire had somehow been restored to its fourth-century extent and the identities of Frank, Goth, Anglo-Saxon, etc. had vanished. The epochs of Late Antiquity and Early Medieval China thus witnessed a renegotiation of political and cultural identities that was to have enormous consequences for the political and cultural history of both Europe and China. A parallel study of contemporary or near-contemporary histories devoted to major events of this transitional period in each civilization will shed light on the ways identities were perceived, represented, and renegotiated – processes that must have been of fundamental importance to the new status quo that was to characterize the European and Chinese experience in the succeeding centuries.

Comparative History of Greece-Rome and China

Comparative study of Greco-Roman and Chinese civilizations, though a relatively young body of scholarship, has continued to grow steadily since the 1990s.⁵ Sino-Hellenic comparisons have occupied the majority of scholars who have preferred the comparative study of literary and philosophical themes, and the focus on philosophy and scientific thought in classical Greek and Warring States Chinese sources has been one of the most privileged areas of comparative study.⁶ Lloyd in particular has produced several studies that examine the development of science, mathematics, and philosophical thought in ancient Greece and China.⁷ Other scholars have examined topics that range from the development of Greek and Chinese poetic traditions to conceptions of geography and space.⁸

⁴ The Qiang are something of an exception in that the term continued to be used for tribal groups in western and southwestern regions not controlled by China. The modern Qiang ethnic minority of China bears a name that was reintroduced as a specific ethnonym in the twentieth century. See Wang, Ming-ke, "From the Qiang Barbarians to the Qiang Nationality," 43–80.

⁵ For an overview of this body of scholarship, see Tanner, "Ancient Greece, Early China: Sino-Hellenic Studies and Comparative Approaches to the Classical World," 89–109.

⁶ For example, Raphals, *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Tradition of China and Greece*; Hall and Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*; Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*.

⁷ Lloyd and Sivin, *The Way and the Word: Science and Medicine in Early China and Greece*; Lloyd, *The Ambitions of Curiosity: Understanding the World in Ancient Greece and China*; Lloyd, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture*; Lloyd and Zhao, *Ancient Greece and China Compared*.

⁸ Cai, Zong-qi, *Configurations of Comparative Poetics: Three Perspectives on Western and Chinese Literary Criticism*; Schaberg, "Travel, Geography, and the Imperial Imagination in Fifth-Century Athens and Han China," 152–91.

More in line with the interests of this project are the studies by Kim and Stuurman that have compared the treatment of foreign or “barbarian” peoples, especially the Scythians and Xiongnu in the works of, respectively, Herodotus and Sima Qian, in classical Greek and Chinese texts.⁹

Most of these studies focus on the relatively early developmental phases of Greco-Roman and Chinese civilization, a fact not surprising given that many consider the greatest efflorescence of cultural genius to have obtained in the classical ages of Greece and the Warring States period of China. Far less attention has been devoted to the seemingly parallel trajectories that led up to and beyond the establishment of the Roman and Han empires, a process through which a series of competing political entities sharing greater or lesser degrees of cultural affinity were reduced in a series of wars that left one supra-regional power standing.

Nevertheless, interest in Rome–China comparative work continues to grow. Gizewski has explored comparative approaches to periodization in Greco-Roman and Chinese antiquity and has sketched the various stages of ecumenical imperial formation in East Asia and in the Mediterranean.¹⁰ Adshead has offered comparisons between the Tang 唐 Empire and the contemporary empires of India, the Muslim world, Byzantium, and Latin Christendom.¹¹ A more concentrated comparative project is Scheidel’s *Rome and China* that focuses on the institutional and economic aspects of the Roman and Han Chinese empires.¹² Scheidel also launched the Stanford Ancient Chinese and Mediterranean Empires Comparative History Project (ACME), an international initiative seeking to promote collaboration between scholars in an effort to determine patterns of historical causality in imperial formation, dissolution, and reunification in China and the Mediterranean. More recently, Burbank and Cooper’s volume, though not limited solely to the comparison of Rome and China, nevertheless offers a comparison of the two empires in a world-historical context, considering issues such as imperial ideology, the role of elite culture as a unifying force over diverse populations, and the role of the periphery and its inhabitants in shaping both imperial policy and worldviews.¹³

⁹ Kim, *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China*; Stuurman, “Herodotus and Sima Qian: History and the Anthropological Turn in Ancient Greece and Han China,” 1–40. Raaflaub and Talbert’s edited volume examines the ethnographic and geographical traditions of a wide range of premodern societies: *Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Pre-modern Societies*.

¹⁰ Gizewski, “Römische und alte chinesische Geschichte im Vergleich: Zur Möglichkeit eines gemeinsamen Altertumsbegriffs,” 271–302.

¹¹ Adshead, *T’ang China: The Rise of the East in World History*, 54–67.

¹² Scheidel, ed., *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires*.

¹³ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History: Geographies of Power, Politics of Difference*.

While there has been increasing interest in comparative study of Greco-Roman and Chinese history – often in the larger context of ancient empires – there are so far relatively few studies that offer comparative consideration of the mentalities and worldviews expressed in the Greco-Roman and Chinese historiographical traditions. An early exception is Prusek's 1970 study, which discusses features typical of Greco-Roman and Chinese historiography, considering the poetic roots of both traditions and the ways in which epic and lyric poetic forms came to influence the genre of prose historiography.¹⁴ Since then, Lloyd, Schaberg, and Mutschler have all taken comparative approaches to historiography in these two traditions.¹⁵ A volume edited by Mutschler and Mittag includes a variety of essays discussing the ideological representation of empire in the Roman and Chinese experience from their periods of pre-unification to dissolution in the early Middle Ages.¹⁶

Yet while comparative study between Rome and China is a growing field, there is not a single study to date that treats both the periods of Late Antiquity and Early Medieval China in any detail. This is unfortunate, as this period is such a critical one for those seeking to understand the nature and quality of the parallels that obtained between the two empires; it is at the point of divergence, of failed or successful imperial reunification, that some of the most significant questions may be asked about the cultural and political institutions fundamental to the integrity of the Roman and Han-Chinese states.¹⁷ As noted above, both the late antique and early medieval Chinese worlds experienced significant influx of border peoples who established polities of their own on formerly imperial soil. The repercussions of these processes of migration and the adoption by the migrants of imperial political forms were to have enormous consequences in either sphere. The historical texts produced to describe these events are our source not only for the establishment of historical chronology but also for the attitudes, perceptions, and worldviews of the respective imperial

¹⁴ Prusek, *Chinese History and Literature: Collection of Studies*, 17–34.

¹⁵ Mutschler, "Vergleichende Beobachtungen zur griechisch-römischen und althinesischen Geschichtschreibung," 213–53; "Zu Sinnhorizont und Funktion griechischer, römischer und althinesischer Geschichtschreibung," 33–54; Schaberg, "Travel, Geography, and the Imperial Imagination in Fifth-Century Athens and Han China," 152–91; Lloyd, *The Ambitions of Curiosity*, especially 1–20.

¹⁶ Mutschler and Mittag, eds., *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared*.

¹⁷ Scheidel, adapting the title of Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence*, has coined the phrase "the first great divergence" in reference to this period where the imperial trajectories of Rome and China diverged from one another. "From the 'Great Convergence' to the 'First Great Divergence': Roman and Qin-Han State Formation and Its Aftermath," in *Rome and China*, 11–23.

literati, those whose writings served to both prescribe and uphold the ideological framework of imperial order.

Walter Scheidel has argued that “only comparisons with other civilizations make it possible to distinguish common features from culturally specific or unique characteristics and developments, help us identify variables that were critical to particular historical outcomes, and allow us to assess the nature of any given ancient state or society within the wider context of premodern world history.”¹⁸ While this study will not share the institutional and economic focus and quantitative methodology adopted by Scheidel, its comparative approach will contribute to a better understanding of ideological currents prominent in the post-fragmentation periods of the Roman and Chinese empires, an undertaking that has not yet been attempted. By presenting a larger possible range of alternatives that could obtain under similar – though geographically isolated and distinct – circumstances, the present work will consider patterns of stasis and dynamism, of flexibility and rigidity in conceptual paradigms of ethnic and political identity. It will examine the tension inherent in efforts to emulate and restore the ideals of the past while acknowledging and coming to terms with the present, a tension that characterized the cultural and political imaginations of literary elites of these two civilizations.

It has been suggested that the comparative study of Rome and China is of a particular importance because of the fact that the classical inheritance and reception of the two empires has had great influence in shaping events in the modern period up to the present day, and that such study also heightens “our awareness of possible analogies between the present and the past, be it with regard to America or China.”¹⁹ Yet one may ask: Why not compare Rome and Sasanian Persia or Gupta India or any other ancient empire for that matter? The simple answer is that it does not, in fact, *have* to be a Rome–China comparison; other empires have offered and will continue to offer valuable points of comparison for specialists of the Greco-Roman world.²⁰ As has been argued by Lloyd, the comparative exercise in and of itself allows us to see the familiar from an otherwise unavailable perspective that can offer important new insights:

¹⁸ Scheidel, *Rome and China*, 5.

¹⁹ Mutschler and Mittag, “Preface,” in *Conceiving the Empire*, xiv.

²⁰ For example, see Morris and Scheidel’s *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium*.

Without a comparativist perspective, students of Greek antiquity will easily mistake, indeed can hardly fail to mistake, what may be distinctive, and what may be said to be in no way exceptional, either in the intellectual products of the society they study or in the circumstances and manner of their production.²¹

The comparison of ethnographic discourse and its relationship to Greco-Roman and Chinese historiography undertaken in this study will enable us to see the ways in which these two traditions perpetuated or transformed political, cultural, and ethnic identities. More importantly, such an approach will allow us to avoid treating different historical outcomes as “inevitable, or as seeing them as miraculous.”²² What is particularly apt about the comparanda selected here is the fact that China has so full a body of documentary evidence that shares many features in common with the literary and historical productions of the Greco-Roman world. Moreover, for anyone familiar with the historical events of the third to seventh centuries AD in Western Europe and in China, the comparison is unavoidable – it has occurred to modern historians one after another, and it is time to take some of the relevant questions beyond anecdotal comments and footnotes that consistently point toward this direction of research that has not yet received the sustained attention it merits. Rome and China in this period exhibit the “extraordinary instances of ‘simultaneity’” that call for “a world/global perspective on late antiquity” through “thematic comparisons.”²³ Is the comparison exact? That is, are the political environments, historical processes, and literary genres and forms of representation perfect equivalents and thereby allowing for seamless comparison? Of course not. But with so many similarities in political experience and circumstances on the one hand, and the convergent aspects of genre and historiographical convention on the other, the *contrasts* between these two traditions, specifically how they reacted to the reality of barbarian kings and emperors ruling a lost imperial heartland, is a necessary, and hitherto virtually untouched, direction of inquiry.

This volume will consider the ideological climate in Roman Late Antiquity and Early Medieval China in regards to perceptions of barbarian identities and the degree to which such identities were compatible with the exercise of political power. Such identities were constructed and

²¹ Lloyd, *Methods and Problems in Greek Science*, xii. ²² Ibid.

²³ Humphries, “Late Antiquity and World History,” 25–26. The recent edited volume by Di Cosmo and Maas, *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity*, is an excellent example of broader, world-historical approaches to the period.

perpetuated in the ethnological discourse received from the early texts of either historiographical tradition; the representation of foreign peoples in Greco-Roman and Chinese classical ethnography served as a basis for the rationalization of ethnic identities that were understood to fall beyond the pale of the civilized centers but must necessarily be understood in terms of those centers. Therefore, this book will assess the adoption, manipulation, and adaptation of this discourse in a later period when, in many ways, the historians themselves had seen their conceptual world, and the representational categories employed to define it, turned upside down. Ultimately, it aims to take a step toward a new understanding of this critical period in history when continuity was restored to the Chinese imperial tradition and the Roman West remained fragmented.

Roman Late Antiquity and Early Medieval China: Brief Historical Background

The third century AD was a time of fragmentation and crisis in both the Roman and Han Chinese empires. Prior to the third century, Rome and Han China had enjoyed virtually unchallenged hegemony over their respective regions since the mid-second century BC. Although the causes and nature of the crisis that befell Rome continue to be debated, there is no disputing that a combination of plague, economic problems, and political instability led to major political disruption in this period. The result was effectively a division of the empire into thirds following the disastrous capture of the emperor Valerian by the Persians in 260: the Gallic Empire of Postumus ruling over Britain, Gaul, and Spain; the Central Empire of Gallienus holding Italy, North Africa, the Balkans, and Thrace; and the Palmyrene Empire of Odenathus and Zenobia ruling Syria, Egypt, and the other eastern provinces. This period of division lasted a relatively short time before the emperor Aurelian (r. 270–275) was able to restore unity by defeating his western and eastern rivals. His restoration would eventually be followed by the political and administrative reforms of Diocletian in the last decades of the century, which allowed the empire to persist for nearly two hundred more years in the west.

The Han Empire, which was formally dissolved in 220, also experienced a period of fragmentation that resulted in a tripartite division of the former empire into the kingdoms of Shu 蜀, Wu 吳, and Wei 魏, the last of which would ultimately destroy the other two over the course of the following decades. Before the final defeat of Wu in 280, however, the powerful Sima 司馬 family had usurped the Wei throne and declared

the establishment of the Jin 晉 dynasty in 265. With the destruction of Wu, unified imperial rule was briefly restored under what has been known to historians since as the Western Jin 西晉 dynasty (265–317). The Western Jin was thus a temporary reunification of China between the fall of the Han dynasty and the nearly three-hundred-year period of division that followed the Western Jin's collapse.

The empires that were restored in the late third century, and only very briefly in the case of the Western Jin, eventually faced military pressure from foreign peoples who would ultimately overthrow imperial rule and establish their own dominance over significant portions of imperial territory. In the Roman case, this was a long process that is typically traced from the disastrous Roman defeat near Adrianople in 378 to the deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476, after which point imperial rule in the west was never wholly reconstituted. The Jin dynasty's restoration following China's own "third-century crisis" was to be far more short-lived. The internecine warfare accompanying the "revolt of the eight princes," *ba wang zhi luan* 八王之亂, which lasted from 291 to 306, left the north of China in such a weak and unstable state that scions of the earlier non-Chinese Xiongnu Empire who had been settled in northern China within the Great Wall were able to sack both the imperial capitals Luoyang and Chang'an and usher in the period known both as the Sixteen Kingdoms, *Shiliu guo* 十六國, as well as "the Five Barbarians throw China into chaos," *Wu Hu luan hua* 五胡亂華. During this period, the majority of China north of the Yangtze River was in the hands of non-Chinese peoples who were all contending for survival and hegemony, both against one another as well as against the émigré Chinese empire in the south (referred to by historians as the Eastern Jin 東晉, which lasted from 317 to 420).

Therefore, from 476 in the West and from 316 in China (the year when the last northern capital, Chang'an, fell to the resurgent Xiongnu and the remnants of the imperial family fled to the south), the territorial heartlands of the former empires were in the hands of barbarian rulers. In the West, imperial territories were divided between the Franks and Burgundians in Gaul, the Angles and Saxons in Britain, the Visigoths in Spain, the Vandals in Africa, and the Ostrogoths in Italy. Wars of reconquest were launched by the emperor Justinian in 533, and by the middle of the sixth century Africa, the Balkans, and Italy were back in Roman hands with a foothold established on the southern coast of Spain.

One can most easily gain a sense of what was going on in China in the fourth century by keeping in mind the image of the post-Roman West and simply rotating the image such that the states of conquest are located in the