

West meets East: At the Borders of the *Oikoumenē* and Beyond

Lecture 21 – Rome and China Compared

CLAH6007

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Comparative Studies

- Increasing development of cross-cultural research
 - trade, belief systems, and technical skills.
- Identifying crucial rather than incidental factors to observed developments and how different contexts produce similar or contrary outcomes.
- Major recent studies on China and Rome
 - Scheidel, W. (ed.), 2009. *Rome and China*.
 - Mutschler, F.-H. and Mittag, A. (eds.), 2008. *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared*.

Why Rome and China?

- Roman and the Chinese empires develop in tandem and are unmatched in their territorial extent and longevity.
 - “...focus on Rome and China two large and durable states which were created through absorption of all or almost all state-level polities in their respective ecologically bounded macroregions ensures direct comparability in terms of observations as well as analysis...” – Schiedel 2009 p.7.
- Both empires produced a wealth of written evidence and material culture – very useful for the comparison of intellectual comparisons.

Parallels and Convergence

- Similar features up to sixth century – large permanent standing armies, substantial resources, competition between local and central elite, ideological claims to “whole” world.
- Parallels in state development – competition with comparable powers – partial hegemonic power - extension of power and political transition – consolidation – fragmentation – restoration and end.
- The Qin and Republican Rome start out on different ends of the spectrum – fourth century AD Rome most convergent with Han.



Divergence

- From sixth century – spread of power – slow later recentralisation – internal social intellectual upheavals – eventual nation states.
- Contra China – restoration of the bureaucratic state, and continuation of core-wide empire.
- Size – lack of comparable competitors – less impact of the Black Death.
- The state managed the allocation of goods to military forces in contrast to the assignment of land in the West?

Command and Consumption

Empire as a Tributary Enterprise

- Extraction of limited surpluses and the concentration of resources.
- Military expenditure and cost to benefit ratio – campaigns verses appeasement.
- Efficiency and economies of scale – low administrative costs – local support for extracting of surpluses.
- Increase in “peasant production” through extraction.

Tribute and Commercialisation

- Transformation of tribute in kind to a more flexible resource.

“Markets and courts were provided to harmonise various demands; these peoples of all classes gathered together and all collected, so that the farmer, merchant, and worker could each obtain what he desired... Thus without artisans, the farmers will be deprived of the use of implements; without merchants, all prized commodities will be cut off. The former would lead to stoppage of grain production, the latter to exhaustion of wealth.” – ***Discourses on Salt and Iron*** – chap. 1 i.

- Lack of commercial exploitation of subject peoples and territories (contra early-modern Europeans).

Imperial Style of Consumption

- Cities or communities as contexts for competitive and public consumption.
- Confucian literati and Graeco-Roman moralists complain of waste of resources.
 - “Beautiful jades and corals from mount K’un. Pearls, rhinoceros horns and elephants tusks are produced in Keui Lin. These places are more than ten thousand li [li = c.500 metres] distance from Han. Calculating the labour for farming and silk raising and the costs in material and capital, it will be found that one article of foreign imports costs a price one hundred times its value... As the rulers treasure goods from distant lands, wealth flows outwards. Therefore, a true king does not value useless things.”

Gifts and Charity

Chinese Culture of Gift Giving

- Awarding of ranks (17 to 20 of them) – prestige and legal privilege – quantities of meat and wine at celebrations.
- Emperors could bestow pardons to those condemned to death or servitude – could be empire wide.
- Providing assistance to regions afflicted with flood or drought.
- Land distribution – money for officials – sacrifices.

Comparison with Rome

- Heavy urban focus to Roman munificence / euergetism – contra Han China, less development of urban “charity” until fifth-sixth centuries.
- Different nature of power bases – importance of rural social networks:
 - Shu Guang – “Moreover, the money I am spending is what was granted by the sage ruler to nourish his old servant. Therefore I am happy to enjoy what he has given me with my fellow villagers and members of my patriline, and thus live out my remaining days.”
- Lack of stone architecture – contrary nature of public (Roman) emperor versus the private (Chinese) emperor – different origins of benefaction.

Eunuchs, Women, and Imperial Courts

Eunuchs

- Widespread historical phenomenon, primarily mean to be servants.
- Prominent in fourth and fifth century AD Roman / Byzantine imperial courts and the Chinese court from the first emperor Qin Shihuangdi (r. 246-221 BC) until 1912.
- Used as a punishment in China for prisoners of war and traitors, but also in the Roman and Byzantine empire:
 - “After his victory [over Saturninus] in the civil war he became even more cruel, and to discover any conspirators who were in hiding, tortured many of the opposite party by a new form of interrogation, inserting fire into their privates; and he cut off the hands of some of them.” – **Suetonius *Domitian* 10.5.**
- Use of eunuchs as sexual partners:
 - “In crime, complicity guarantees silence. The skilful wife anticipates, and therefore begins with them. There are women thrilled by effete eunuchs, with their kisses ever-gentle, and their hopeless never-to-be-fulfilled beards, then, there’s no need to use abortifacients. It’s the very height of pleasure for them...” - **Juvenal *Satires* 366-77.**

- Eunuchs very high value in the Roman Empire – Alexandrian Tariff – most from outside the empire, contra China.
- Princes in China grew up around eunuchs - eunuchs competed with the Confucian trained officials for political influence – hostility of the historiographical tradition.
- On Qin Shihuangdi death, Zhao Gao conspires to place Hu Hia on the throne and eliminate Fu Su, and subsequently the prime-minister Li Si – Rebellion and murder of second empire – foundation of Han dynasty by Liu Bang.

Imperial Women

- Rise of the eunuchs under the empress dowager Lu.
- Eunuchs and power politics of women in the imperial court.
- Monogamous system in the Roman Empire – eunuchs of increasing importance by 4th to 5th centuries – counterweight to the aristocracy.
- Position of Grand Chamberlin (*praepositus sacri cubiculi*) – e.g. Eutropius.

“At home he [Plautianus] castrated a hundred Roman citizens of noble birth — though none of us knew of it until after he was dead. From this anyone may comprehend the full extent both of his lawlessness and of his power. Nor was it boys or youths alone that he castrated, but grown men as well, some of whom had wives. His purpose was that Plautilla, his daughter, whom Antoninus [Caracalla] afterwards married, should have only eunuchs as her attendants in general, and especially as her teachers in music and other branches of art. So we saw the same persons both eunuchs and men, fathers and impotent, emasculated and bearded.” – **Dio Cassius 76.14.**

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