

New Perspectives on Comparative Medieval History: China and Europe, 800-1600. Research group “China and the Historical Sociology of Empire”, 30.09.2013-01.10.2013.

Reviewed by Franz-Julius Morche

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The international workshop “New Perspectives on Comparative Medieval History: China and Europe, 800-1600”, organised by the research group “China and the Historical Sociology of Empire”, was held at Pembroke College, Oxford, on 30th September and 1st October 2013. The meeting was intended to discuss representations of medieval Chinese and European history in current comparative frameworks with particular respect to concepts and methodologies as well as to practical aspects of collaborative comparative projects. An open panel format allowed for extensive discussions.

The first panel, “Collaboration in Comparative History”, brought together scholars with a record in collaborative research. PETER BANG (Copenhagen) reported on the challenges of world history projects that emphasised cross-periodical comparisons, making the case for generating historical contexts that allow for explicit comparisons. WALTER SCHEIDEL (Stanford) suggested that the most fundamental difficulties of collaborative comparative research stemmed from a traditional aversion to collaboration within the humanities. World history in particular suffers from a lack of applicable general frameworks, as the parallel pursuit of very different historiographical traditions is often difficult to coordinate and rarely produces tangible results. The particularity of Byzantine historiography in the context of a global perspective that includes both Western Europe

and China was highlighted by CATHERINE HOLMES (Oxford). GLEN DUDBRIDGE (Oxford) pointed out that a likely root cause of methodological confusion in large-scale comparative research might be a focus on “crunchy” rather than “fluid” topics, that is, the analysis of institutions, forms of government, customs, or narratives that are not well-suited for comparative analysis is often emphasised over factors that a global comparative perspective could potentially illuminate more accurately – spoken languages, population dynamics, religious movements, or networking to name a few examples.

A frequently used concept in the analysis of such factors is divergence. The second panel sought to offer a reassessment of current scholarship within the cross-continental divergence debate and shifted attention away from “crunchy” institutions and economic factors towards a more comprehensive understanding of divergence. MICHAEL PUETT (Cambridge, MA) identified problems of chronology as a major obstacle of meaningful cross-continental comparisons, which often occur in the context of ‘modernity’ approaches that remain confined to teleological frameworks using “the West” as the main model. R.I. MOORE (Newcastle) argued that, while distinct institutional developments in medieval Europe and China such as different degrees of integration of “ecclesiastical” and “worldly” powers are clearly identifiable, these should not be mis-

understood as pre-modern trajectories of divergence. Instead, such developments would represent institutional bifurcations whose long-term implications with respect to economic and social outcomes are ambiguous. JARED RUBIN (Orange, CA) presented evidence on a correlation between degrees of legitimacy of political authority and economic growth in pre-modern Europe and the Middle East. In Western Europe, where parliaments gradually replaced religious authority and military power as sources of political authority, direct bargaining between governments and subjects as economic actors provided more favourable economic incentives than in the Ottoman Empire, where private capital accumulation and individual property rights remained severely restricted. DEBIN MA (London) examined the likely role of political institutions in economic outcomes with specific respect to pre-divergence China, showing that the early emergence of a unified territorial state in China was responsible for a unique institutional trajectory leading simultaneously to a consolidation of political authority and economic decentralisation.

The re-focusing of the divergence debate was carried over to a third session devoted to the theory and terminology of networks in the context of large-scale processes of cross-regional exchange. PETER HEATHER (London) showed that the relative disparities in agricultural production between Central, Eastern and Western Europe in the first millennium AD were gradually closed through processes of technology transfer at the fringes of economic zones. Reporting on an ongoing group research project, JANET NELSON (London) presented geo-spatial evidence to reassess the geographical distribution of political networks in the Charlemagne Empire. GEORG CHRIST (Manchester) showed how the efficiency of Venetian consular efforts in the Later Middle Ages could be measured against the level of interconnectivity of Venetian consular networks to their host environment, citing the example of the Venetian consulate in Alexandria. R. BIN WONG (Los Angeles)

suggested a new framework for comparing the role of religion in the development of state institutions, and, in return, the control of religious authority through the state in medieval and early modern Europe and China.

Participants agreed that political and economic patterns emerging in different world regions in the course of the long middle ages have thus far been underrepresented in both world history and comparative frameworks. This is particularly the case with respect to the emergence of states and structures of governance and the underlying roles of non-institutional, “fluid” factors such as religious belief, changing meteorological conditions, and technology transfer. The presentations showed that within the boundaries of area studies many such factors have already been under investigation. The primary tasks of comparative research efforts will now be to transfer analytical methods and insights from one field of area studies to another and ultimately to create new historical narratives that are truly global in character. For both tasks, the discussions during the workshop provided a useful point of departure.

Conference Overview:

Session 1: Collaboration in Comparative History.

Chair: Georg Christ

Peter Bang (University of Copenhagen), ‘Holding a Woolf by the ears’ – interdisciplinary discourse and comparative world history

Walter Scheidel (Stanford University), Herding cats: the challenge of collaborative comparative history

Catherine Holmes (Oxford University), Juggling with three balls: comparing the Medieval West, China and Byzantium

Glen Dudbridge (Oxford University), Another discipline, another place: approaches to collaborative work on the study of the global past

Session 2: Divergence.

Chair: Peter Bang

Michael Puett (Harvard University), Divergence as a category of comparative history: the case of China in Eurasian history

R. I. Moore (Newcastle University), The First great divergence?

Jared Rubin (Chapman University), Legitimacy and economic outcomes in the Middle East and Europe

Debin Ma (London School of Economics and Political Science), Political regimes and great divergence: the case of China

Session 3: Networks.

Chair: Franz-Julius Morche

Peter Heather (King's College London), The making of Europe: Western Eurasia in the first millennium AD

Janet Nelson (King's College London), Social networks in the age of Charlemagne: friendship or dependence?

Georg Christ (University of Manchester), Comparative advantage? Venetian consular networks and information flows between India, the Mamluk Empire and Latin Europe (c. 1300-1500)

R. Bin Wong (University of California Los Angeles), Transmissions of belief and power: contrasting relations between religion and political authority in China and Europe, c. 1000-1800

Final roundtable discussion.

Chair: Hilde De Weerd

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