

Rome and China: comparative perspectives on ancient world empires

Edited by Walter Scheidel (Stanford University)

Oxford University Press (New York)

General background

2,000 years ago, up to one-half of the human species was contained within two political systems, the Roman empire in western Eurasia (centered on the Mediterranean Sea) and the Han empire in eastern Eurasia (centered on the great northern plain of China). Both empires were broadly comparable in terms of size (c. 4 million square kilometers each) and population (c. 60+ million each), and even largely coextensive in chronological terms (221 BC to 220 CE for the Qin/Han empire, c. 200 BC to 395 CE for the unified Roman empire). Both empires were the result of the gradual coalescing of a large number of smaller polities into a handful of large imperial states that were eventually unified by one of them.

At the most basic level of resolution, the circumstances of their creation are 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, Greek in this case, 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.

Subsequent 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, the trajectories of historical development began to diverge in an increasingly dramatic fashion. In China, disunity lasted from the 310s to 589 CE, 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 AD, resulting in pervasive political fragmentation that reached a nadir around AD 1000. 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 may be called 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' (Pomeranz 2000) between

modern growth in Europe and stagnation in later imperial China – has barely begun to be considered by contemporary scholarship.

These processes of initial convergence and subsequent divergence in Eurasian state formation have never been the object of systematic comparative analysis. Rather, the histories of the ancient Mediterranean and ancient China are almost invariably treated as completely separate topics, and have usually been studied by scholars with different training who belong to different departments or programs. Communication between these two areas of specialization has been minimal at best. This lack of interaction imposes severe constraints on our ability to understand the factors that drove state formation in either one of these systems. Only comparative history 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 (in this case, very large agrarian empires).

Purpose and structure

This volume seeks to make a first step in this direction, by presenting a series of comparative case studies on clearly defined aspects of state formation in early eastern and western Eurasia, focusing on the process of initial developmental convergence. (The late antique divergence will be the subject of a future sequel to this volume, which will be based on the contributions to an upcoming year-long research seminar on this topic at Stanford University.) Comparative study commonly serves two related purposes: to test predictive theories (an approach that works best for large samples of cases, which is not the case here), and to identify significant variables that help account for shared or contrasting features and outcomes (which is feasible for a pair of cases that lack further close parallels, as in this case). The case studies will in the first instance employ the latter variety of comparative history. ‘Universal’ world empires, or ‘core-wide’ empires in the terminology of world-systems theory (Chase-Dunn & Hall 1997), in the sense of states that managed to absorb all or most adjacent state-level polities and replace earlier state systems with a single empire, have been very rare in history: Qin/Han and Tang China, the Roman empire, and the Inka empire are the main examples. It can be hypothesized that such systems differ in significant ways from polities that are embedded in wider state systems, and therefore invite direct comparison. The main objective of this project is to enhance our understanding of features and developments that are customarily regarded as characteristics of a single world empire (either Rome *or* China) by re-assessing them in an explicitly comparative framework. This will permit us to correlate specific preconditions with specific outcomes, and thus to establish historical causation in ways that are not feasible in self-contained studies of individual systems.

Contents

Chapter 1

“Introduction: A tale of two empires” (10,000 words)

Walter Scheidel

Contents: brief sketch of the historical context; discussion of the methods and objectives of comparative historical analysis; survey of existing scholarship; introduction to the structure of the volume.

Author: Walter Scheidel is Professor of Classics at Stanford University. His research focuses on ancient social and economic history, historical demography, and comparative and interdisciplinary world history. Related projects include a co-edited volume on *The dynamics of ancient empires* (comparing ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern empires), and a monograph in progress on the application of modern theories and models to the study of ancient empires.

Chapter 2

“State formation in Rome and China” (40,000 words)

Walter Scheidel

Contents: systematic comparative analysis of the reconfiguration of social power in warring states environments and subsequent universal empires; consideration of long-term patterns and consequences.

Chapter 3

“The evolution of military institutions: ancient and early imperial China and Republican and imperial Rome” (15,000 words)

Nathan Rosenstein

Contents: focus on the means of mobilization (conscription, bargaining), the shift to professionalization and the peripherization of military service; the relationship between war and ruling class culture; the role of military in domestic politics.

Authors: Nathan Rosenstein is Professor of History at Ohio State University. He specializes in Roman military, political, and social history, and co-edited a collaborative volume on *War and society in the ancient and medieval worlds*.

Chapter 4

“Laws and rulers” (10,000 words)

Karen Turner

Contents: comparative study of the role and image of emperors as law makers, with reference to legitimacy, precedent, and the relationship between legal and political institutions

Author: Karen Turner is the Rev. John Brooks Chair in the Humanities and Professor of History at the College of the Holy Cross. Her work focuses on comparative law, Chinese legal history, human rights, and women and war. She is working on a book on the origins of law in China.

Chapter 5

“Commanding and consuming the world: empire, tribute, and trade in Roman and Chinese history” (12,000 words)

Peter Bang

Contents: focus on empire as a tributary enterprise, the role of markets, and the development of imperial consumption styles

Author: Peter Bang is Associate Professor of History at the University of Copenhagen. His research focuses on the comparative economic history and the political economy of the Roman empire and Mughal India. He is the director of a European network for the comparative study of the Roman, Mughal, and Ottoman empires.

Chapter 6

“Gift circulation and charity” (10,000 words)

Mark Lewis

Contents: the nexus between euergetism and authority; contrasts in the contexts, media and mechanisms of welfare, and their causes and consequences

Author: Mark Lewis is the Kwoh-Ting Li Professor in Chinese Culture at Stanford University. He specializes in the history of ancient China, and is currently working on a pair of books on the early Chinese empires.

Chapter 7

“Women, eunuchs, and imperial courts” (9,000)

Maria Dettenhofer

Contents: roles of empresses and eunuchs in court politics, illustrating the shift from male-dominated warring states regimes to more civilian court-centered monarchies

Author: Maria Dettenhofer is Professor of Ancient History at the University of Munich. Her research focuses on Roman political and court history, gender, and the comparative history of Rome and Han China. She currently teaches a course on the topic of her chapter.

Chapter 8

“The monetary systems of the Han and Roman empires” (30,000 words)

Walter Scheidel

Contents: comprehensive historical survey of ancient Chinese money juxtaposed with a more compact outline of Roman money; systematic analysis of differences and their causes; consideration of monetization levels and public finances

Existing scholarship

No comparable volume exists in any language. Comparative work on the Greco-Roman world and ancient China has been extremely rare, and moreover largely 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 active proponent of this line of enquiry has been Geoffrey Lloyd, with five books to date (Lloyd 1996, Lloyd & Sivin 2002, Lloyd 2003, 2004, 2005). Further efforts in the same area were undertaken by Steven Shankman and Stephen Durrant (Shankman & Durrant 2000, 2002), and by David Hall and Roger Ames (Hall & Ames 1995, 1998), as well as Lu 1998, Kuriyama 1999, Schaberg 1999, Mutschler 2003, Reding 2004, and Sim 2007. Their work was preceded by Konrad 1967 and Raphaels 1992. Poo 2005 explores attitudes toward foreigners in the ancient Near East and China, and Kim 2007 compares concepts of ethnicity in ancient Greece and China. 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. Hsing I-Tien 1980, an unpublished thesis, seems to be the main exception in a western language; cf. also Lorenz 1990 and Motomura 1991, and now Adsheed 2000: 4-21 and 2004: 20-29 as well as Dettenhofer 2006 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: Mutschler & Mittag 2005. Hui 2005 expands comparisons beyond antiquity. Recent historico-sociological studies of imperialism and social power that deal with Greece and Rome comparatively and within a broader context do not normally include China (Doyle 1986; Mann 1986); the older global study by Eisenstadt 1963 is the only notable exception (cf. also Eisenstadt 1986). Kautsky 1982 excludes post-Zhou China. A new collection on early empires also failed to alter the picture (Alcock et al.

2001), and the same is true of Morris & Scheidel forthcoming. Some work has been appeared on relations between Rome and China (e.g., Raschke 1978; Leslie & Gardiner 1996), especially in the general context of Silk Road studies, but this perspective is of no relevance here (cf. also Teggart 1939).

References

- Adshead, S. A. M. 2000 *China in world history* (3rd ed., Palgrave)
- Adshead, S. A. M. 2004 *T'ang China: the rise of the East in world history* (Palgrave Macmillan)
- Alcock, Susan E., et al. (eds.) 2001 *Empires: perspectives from archaeology and history* (Cambridge University Press)
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher, and Hall, Thomas D. 1997 *Rise and demise: comparing world-systems* (Westview)
- Dettenhofer, Maria H. 2006 'Das römische Imperium und das China der Han-Zeit: Ansätze zu einer historischen Komparatistik', *Latomus* 65 (in press)
- Doyle, Michael, W. 1986 *Empires* (Cornell University Press)
- Eisenstadt, S. N. 1963 *The political systems of empires: the rise and fall of historical bureaucratic societies* (Free Press)
- Eisenstadt, S. N. (ed.) 1986 *The origins and diversity of axial age civilizations* (SUNY Press)
- Hall, David L., and Ames, Roger T. 1995 *Anticipating China: thinking through the narratives of Chinese and Western culture* (SUNY Press)
- Hall, David L., and Ames, Roger T. 1998 *Thinking from the Han: self, truth, and transcendence in Chinese and Western culture* (SUNY Press)
- Hsing I-Tien 1980 'Rome and China: the role of the armies in the imperial succession: a comparative study' (PhD thesis, University of Hawaii at Manoa)
- Hui, Victoria Tin-bor 2005 *War and state formation in ancient China and early modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press)
- Kautsky, John H. 1982 *The politics of aristocratic empires* (University of North Carolina Press; repr. Transaction Publishers, 1997)
- Kim, Hyun Jin 2007 'Ethnicity and foreigners in ancient Greece and China: a comparative analysis of the *Histories* of Herodotus and the *Shiji* of Sima Qian' (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University)
- Konrad, N. I. 1967 'Polybius and Ssu-ma Ch'ien', *Soviet Sociology* 5.4: 37-58
- Kuriyama, S. 1999 *The expressiveness of the body and the divergence of Greek and Chinese medicine* (Zone Books)
- Leslie, D. D., and Gardiner, K. H. J. 1996 *The Roman empire in Chinese sources* (Bardi Editore)
- Lloyd, Geoffrey 1996 *Adversaries and authorities: investigations into ancient Greek and Chinese science* (Cambridge University Press)
- Lloyd, Geoffrey 2003 *The ambitions of curiosity: understanding the world in ancient Greece and China* (Cambridge University Press)
- Lloyd, Geoffrey 2004 *Ancient worlds, modern reflections: philosophical perspectives on Greek and Chinese science and culture* (Oxford University Press)
- Lloyd, Geoffrey 2005 *The delusions of invulnerability: wisdom and morality in ancient Greece, China and today* (Duckworth)
- Lloyd, Geoffrey, and Sivin, Nathan 2002 *The way and the word: science and medicine in early China and Greece* (Yale University Press)
- Lorenz, G. 1990 'Das Imperium Romanum und das China der Han-Dynastie: Gedanken und Materialien zu einem Vergleich', *Informationen für Geschichtslehrer* 12: 9-60
- Lu Xing 1998 *Rhetoric in ancient China, fifth to third century B.C.E.: a comparison with classical Greek rhetoric* (University of South Carolina Press)
- Mann, Michael 1986 *The sources of social power, I: a history of power from the beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge University Press)
- Morris, Ian, and Scheidel, Walter (eds.) forthcoming *The dynamics of ancient empires*
- Motomura, Ryoji 1991 'An approach towards a comparative study of the Roman empire and the Ch'in and Han empires', *Kodai* 2: 61-69

- Mutschler, Fritz-Heiner 2003 'Zu Sinnhorizont und Funktion griechischer, römischer und altchinesischer Geschichtsschreibung', in *Sinn (in) der Antike* (Zabern): 33-54
- Mutschler, Fritz-Heiner and Mittag, Achim 2005 'Conceiving the "empire": ancient China and Rome – an intercultural comparison in dialogue', April 20-23, 2005, Essen (Germany)
- Pomeranz, Kenneth 2000 *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton University Press)
- Poo, Mu-chou 2005 *Enemies of civilization: attitudes toward foreigners in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China* (SUNY Press)
- Raphaels, Lisa Ann 1992 *Knowing words: wisdom and cunning in the classical tradition of China and Greece* (Cornell University Press)
- Raschke, Manfred G. 1978 'New studies in Roman commerce with the east', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt im Spiegel der neueren Forschung* II 9.2 (De Gruyter): 604-1361
- Reding, Jean-Paul 2004 *Comparative essays in early Greek and Chinese rational thinking* (Ashgate)
- Schaberg, David 1999 'Travel, geography, and the imperial imagination in fifth-century Athens and Han China', *Comparative Literature* 51.2: 152-91
- Shankman, Stephen, and Durrant, Stephen W. 2000 *The siren and the sage: knowledge and wisdom in ancient Greece and China* (SUNY Press)
- Shankman, Stephen, and Durrant, Stephen W. (eds.) 2002 *Early China/Ancient Greece: thinking through comparisons* (SUNY Press)
- Sim, May 2007 *Remastering morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (Cambridge University Press)
- Teggart, Frederick 1939 *Rome and China: a study of correlations in historical events* (University of California Press, repr. Greenwood 1983)