


BOOK REVIEW

***Political Communication in Chinese and European History, 800–1600* Edited by Hilde De Weerd and Franz-Julius Morche. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 634 pp. € 218 (cloth).**

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Institutionally, historians are trained as specialists in country-based history. It takes tremendous effort to learn the necessary craft to interpret and re-interpret primary materials in their specific contexts. However, as Hilde De Weerd and Franz-Julius Morche point out in their introduction, historians often implicitly appeal to comparison to reach their conclusions or suggest general implications of their empirical studies. One great contribution of this edited volume is that it conducts an explicit historical comparison by inviting specialists in the history of Song China and medieval European history to engage with each other.

The edited volume focuses on the role of political communication (mainly in the written form) in political systems, which range from city-state to territorial empire and state. The category “political communication” in the volume is quite wide, including communication within a bureaucracy, between authorities and their subjects, and among literate elites with a strong political consciousness. This broadly defined political communication opens many new arenas to compare the processes of transmitting, mediating, and reacting to information of various political types in different institutional contexts. Also considered is the interaction of political communication with critical historical events.

Readers may wonder about the value of detailed micro-level comparative historical study. Regardless of the similarities or differences demonstrated in comparison, the question remains of why, or to what extent, these comparisons matter to our understanding of political development in Chinese and European history. What is at issue here is the methodology of comparative research in general and of comparative historical analysis in particular. Would specialist historians conducting a comparative study implicitly be guided by the case study of which they have expert knowledge, and then look only for similarities or differences that appeal to them in cases that they are not familiar with? In this case, would the conversation among specialists in comparative historical studies just pass each other by, without real engagement? Could the conclusion

reached by micro-level comparative history in a relatively short period still be valid in a wider and longer historical context? Would non-specialists' stereotypes about Chinese and European history (often found in macro-level comparison) sneak back into micro-level comparative history? These questions highlight the importance of research design in comparative historical studies.

In Chapter 8, "Giving the Public Due Notice in Song China and Renaissance Rome," Patricia Ebrey and Margaret Meserve examine carefully how governments in two different place-times publicly announced matters related to governance. Images of the two different governments familiar from macro-level comparative studies re-appear in this micro-level comparison: a contract-based relationship between ruler and the ruled in Rome and a paternalist hierarchy of ruler over subjects in China. While in public notices the Song government often gave moral teachings to the ruled, the posting of notices in Rome was mainly about a "legislative or bureaucratic enterprise, not a moral one" (361). Considering the big difference in the size of territory of Song China and Renaissance Rome, one may wonder whether the contrast would hold when comparing Song China with a larger polity. In seventeenth-century England, for example, the royal government also issued public notices with strong moral teachings, such as the importance of maintaining communal harmony by reducing the use of litigation to settle civil disputes. Meanwhile, the hierarchical relationship between authorities and subjects can also contain a contractual element: the ruler had a duty to protect the welfare of the subjects in return for their obedience and loyalty. The importance of governance in political communication is also highlighted by Jean-Philippe Genet in Chapter 3, "Language and Political Communication in France and England (Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries)." To secure the consent of the ruled through persuasion rather than coercion through public means such as notices seems to be a common concern of rulers governing a large territory, which makes fifteenth-century France or England a more appropriate unit than Renaissance Rome to compare with Song China.

In Chapter 4, Julian Haseldine proposes a transaction approach to examine how writers and recipients of letters dynamically constructed and consolidated relationships. Beverly Bossler and Benoît Grévin in Chapter 5 and Beverly Bossler in Chapter 6 apply this approach to reveal a surprisingly similar pattern in preserved letter collections in Song China and Latin Europe, particularly in genre and format. Partly because medieval European letters were collected in monasteries while Song letters with literary value were printed in collections, the comparison is more focused on formal features than content. To meaningfully compare content requires that letters have been produced in a similar context. For example, Chapter 10, "Letters and Parting Valedictions," by Chen Song contains details on how to govern a locality that were provided in the letters of a literate elite man, Zhang Yu, and addressed to departing magistrates. A possible comparative pairing would be letters by a rural gentleman to state agents about issues of local governance in Europe, yet such letters are more likely to be found in early modern Western Europe than in medieval times, let alone in monasteries. Comparative work requires careful selection of cases and sources.

This issue of comparability is treated very carefully in Chapter 9, "The Printers' Networks of Chen Qi (1186–1256) and Robert Estienne (1503–1559)," by Chu Ming Kin and Franz-Julius Morche. By laying out in great detail the parallels between the two contexts, such as a breakthrough in printing techniques, increasing literacy, and expansion of the book market, the authors highlight a meaningful difference: post-print censorship in Song China, pre-print censorship in early modern France. But can this specific conclusion extend to China and Europe more generally beyond the episodes

examined by the two authors? If historians found cases of pre-printing censorship in China and/or cases of post-printing censorship in early modern Europe, then we may ask whether this finding applies beyond the particular cases. Of course, one cannot fault the two authors for not doing this in a short chapter in an edited volume. But beginning the chapter with an observation of censorship in contemporary China and liberal-democratic Europe may lead to the pitfall of ahistoricity: to project the contemporary differences between China and Europe back into comparative historical studies.

The question of the validity of conclusions reached by a specific case-study of a short period when put into historical contexts with longer time spans appears in two fascinating chapters in the volume. In a comparative study of elite masculinities, Yue Fei and Thomas Becket find in Chapter 11 that the relationship between *wen* and *wu* was not just about the relationship between martial values and literary cultivation. It refers to the deeper question of how a civilian government can keep its armed forces under control. As this is a general issue in any political system, it may be fruitful to examine further. For example, why was masculinity such a dominant theme in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but not in China during the same period, when the civilian control of armed forces remained equally solid in both cases?

Ari Daniel Levine demonstrates wonderfully in Chapter 12 the parallels in historical narratives of the fall of two capitals, Kaifeng of Northern Song and Byzantine Constantinople. In a longer historical context, the narrative of the fall of Kaifeng had been told through popular story-telling to illiterate audiences in China ever since the end of the Song dynasty, yet no such parallel can be found in the case of the fall of Constantinople. Should we go further beyond the seeming similarities of cases being compared? Byzantinist Mark Whittow raises this question in his reading of Song history. Despite many similarities across these two cases, the construction of the cultural identity of Han Chinese in an imagined community of China as a proto-nation state is absent in the case of the Byzantine Empire. Whittow's observation may push Chinese historians to re-think a phenomenon we have taken for granted. This attests the value and potential of comparative historical studies.

Whittow's productive observation, however, also brings to the fore a challenging question in comparative study: should we compare histories of various regions at the same period, or should we compare similar processes or phenomena that happened in different episodes in different parts of the world? For example, is Song China more comparable to the early modern states in western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than to medieval Europe, which is closer to Song China in time? The story of financial recentralization in Southern Song, skillfully told by Christian Lamouroux in section 1 of Chapter 2, resonates very much with the military-fiscal state in eighteenth-century England. Both states needed not only to mobilize more resources through credit instruments in fighting consecutive and expensive foreign wars, but also to strengthen central control over military expenditures. The early modern fiscal state in the context of warfare did appear in Song China and western Europe, though at different times. Likewise, the change from majuscule book script to minuscule script in the Byzantine Empire, in chapter 2.2 by Filippo Ronconi, might be compared to dynasties earlier than Song when written scripts or styles had not been standardized yet.

In separate epilogues, Robert Hymes discusses the methodological issues in comparative historical studies and Wim Blockmans raises the important question of how micro-level comparative historical studies of China and Europe could shed light on their respective historical development. This edited volume represents a new approach to conducting comparative historical studies by building comparisons upon specialists' rich

understandings of primary materials drawn from both sides. With this better research design that focuses on specific themes and links them with appropriate temporal dimensions, micro-comparative historical studies would provide a solid foundation on which to re-write macrohistorical comparisons of China and Europe, attending more closely to political processes, agency, and events. As Wim Blockmans points out, such a macro comparison would be able to identify how and why similarities and differences between China and Europe matter to understanding the history of both places.