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The authors and editors of the collective volume Ancient Greece and China Compared, which has originated as a collection of contributions to a conference, set themselves ambitious goals. It is clear from the articles conceived as general introductions and methodological discussions as well as the afterword that they aim at dispelling the doubts often raised in connection with various more or less successful comparative projects, and to prove such comparisons to be meaningful. The volume features many outstanding scholars in their respective fields, those with a sinological background somewhat outnumbering those with a Western classical background.

The book contains sixteen contributions, including an introduction by G. E. R. Lloyd, and an afterword by Michael Loewe. Its fourteen chapters are organized into five sections, devoted respectively to ‘Methodologies and Goals,’ ‘Philosophy and Religion,’ ‘Art and Literature,’ ‘Mathematics and Life Science,’ and ‘Agriculture, Planning and Institutions.’

One can heartily approve the numerous observations about the benefits of the comparative approach brought forward in the methodological expositions, such as in Lloyd’s or Scheidel’s contributions (‘Introduction: Methods, Problems and Prospects’ and ‘Comparing Comparisons’ respectively). Comparison is surely indispensable for abolishing the alleged inevitability of given developments and coming closer to the explanation of these developments, in drawing our attention to points that we might otherwise miss. Likewise, only comparison can lead to well-founded answers to the question of cross-cultural universals and those regarding the viability of our own categories. I would also agree with the stance that it is rather a perspective than a method. But apart from that, there are also some problems in these discussions that have not helped make me less distrustful of comparative history as we have known it. It is for example quite puzzling to see that the contributors do not concur even in the crucial methodological issue of selecting comparanda: while Sivin and Puett—and I think Lloyd would agree as well—advance the quite reasonable view that only comparable things should be compared, Scheidel asserts, however,
that “in a sense, the less close and connected they [i.e. the comparanda] are, the better” (p. 43). One should probably be clear at least on this question. Scheidel’s chapter touches upon other sensitive points. Its merit consists in offering “palliative” strategies to common objections to such inter-cultural comparisons. These objections, raised by more skeptical scholars, result from concerns about professional standards, and it is easy to share them. Scheidel may mock his colleagues for asking him “So are you learning Chinese?”, but this is precisely the question to begin with. Although the view is presented here and echoed elsewhere that it is not possible for “most ordinary mortals” to master two philologies, it is obviously an evasive overstatement, since there are more than a few examples of people having attained adequate standards in two or even more than two philologies. But surely, collaboration may be a solution, though we see only a moderate amount of it in this volume. Moreover, in Scheidel’s somewhat disappointed overview of what has been done in this field so far (pp. 47-55), I miss some names of scholars who have been working in comparative philosophy and philology for years, several of whom were trained both in the classical languages and Classical Chinese. Particularly, I am somewhat disquieted that I cannot find a single mention of Christoph Harbsmeier in the whole volume and his Thesaurus Linguae Sericae, which has as its subtitle ‘An Historical and Comparative Encyclopaedia of Chinese Conceptual Schemes.’

In a sense, the non-metacomparative part of the book opens with Robert Wardy’s chapter ‘On the Very Idea of (Philosophical?) Translation,’ although it is placed as the last contribution of the section entitled ‘Methodological issues and goals.’ It is because the second half of it is a case study. However, it was not, in my opinion, a good choice in any case. Despite much entertaining talk, Wardy’s text seems to illustrate what is regrettably often the case, namely that “philosophical translation” tends to camouflage bad philology, and that the concerns regarding professional standards are not exaggerated. If such subjects as contrastive historical lexical semantics or Begriffsgeschichte has not been ignored, Wardy (p. 72) would perhaps not translate qíng 情 as “essence” and reject Ziporyn’s (2009) perfectly sound rendering of the term in this text without referring to either of the articles by Harbsmeier (2014) or Eifring (2014), the latter one at least referenced by Jenny Zhao later in this volume), and likewise, he would not claim that fēng 封 could mean ‘dyke’ in ancient Chinese, let alone that fēng 封 and zhěn 畚 may be understood as dykes between rice paddies (p. 76).

That being said, I hasten to add that Wardy is not the only one who mistranslates Chinese. It is not so uncommon to find even distinguished scholars whose rendering of Classical Chinese are open to dispute. As far as this entire volume is concerned, I wonder why qiōng 貧 (p. 119), for instance, is translated as “poor” (which is pín 貧 in classical Chinese),
whereas it means ‘lack of success’ and is listed by the author of the chapter (Jenny Zhao) alongside its antonym tōng 通 ‘success’ (NB: not alongside fù 富)? Why is dú 獨 (p. 91) translated as “selfish,” while it means ‘independent’ or even ‘individualist,’ and is quite different from the word sī 私, the regular term for selfishness (in principle, independent acts need not be selfish)? Is it acceptable that shī 師 is rendered as “commander” in one place (in the verb-object collocation shī xīn 師心, p. 91) and as “teachings” in another (in the binome shīfǎ 師法, p. 125), whereas it actually means ‘teacher’?

R. A. H. King’s contribution deals with the notion of freedom in the Zhuāngzǐ as opposed to Epictetus and other Stoics. This serious study encouraged me to read further in spite of some initial disappointment. It is well argued and draws attention to some interesting questions, for example that of the concept of free will or freedom conditioned by abiding to rules.

Jingyi Jenny Zhao investigates the conception of shame and the related topics of moral education in the Xūnzǐ and Aristotle, elaborating on an earlier article by Antonio Cua (2003). Here, I cannot again help thinking how greatly the author would benefit from searching Thesaurus Linguae Sericae. The chapter is illuminating in many respects, however, the merit of the comparison might be more evident if the well-known theme of guilt societies and shame societies were brought into the discussion, especially once we realise that there is a tendency to classify Asian societies as typical shame societies. It is definitely interesting from this perspective that both philosophers appear to think of shame in terms of ethical choices and internalisation of values, which casts doubt on the much-debated types of societies especially in the case of China.

Lisa Raphals offers a survey of various approaches to the phylogenesis of animals and their relationship to the man as a king of beings. The overview may be useful as preliminary terrain reconnaissance, the selection of sources, however, provokes some doubts. I am not sure whether it is helpful to compare such different texts as the Zhuāngzǐ, Huáinánzǐ, Lièzǐ, Hesiod, Pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle, moreover without even mentioning that the Lièzǐ is usually considered a mediaeval forgery, and for good reasons (Graham 1961; cf. Barrett 1993).

Michael Puett’s main theme is the inherent capriciousness of the divine, a feeling obviously shared both by the Ancient Greeks and Chinese. His careful differentiation between genres and consequently between the performative ritual space and the extra-ritual world is instructive. It leads to conclusions that go against existent generalisations, though it turns out in the end that there are also important differences in the function of ritual between the two cultures (separation of humans from the gods in Greece vs. connection with the spirits in China).
Jeremy Tanner’s field is visual art. He compares political visual representations in Athens of the fourth century BCE and in Jining (Shandong province) of the second century CE. These settings are truly unequal, and thus, though both lines of exposition are interesting in themselves, the author cannot but conclude by admitting that the analysed Greek artifacts and the Chinese shrine relief have little in common. Nonetheless, we can see at least that, as so often, the same fundamental principles can be discovered on both sides.

The results of Zhou Yiqun’s study of the depiction of femmes fatales in Greece (in particular Helen) and in China are valuable in their explicit structural interpretation. The difference between on one hand the diversity, complexity, and even ambiguity of the conception of Helen, intersecting with other crucial issues such as beauty, love, and eventually to kalon ‘the beautiful,’ and the one-sidedness and stubbornly didactic and schematic depiction of femmes fatales in China on the other hand stands out clearly from the comparison. The author makes an interesting suggestion that it may also be related to the practice of Greek legal processes and exercises in exculpation in contrast to China’s relative disinterest in the principle of audiatur et altera pars (‘May the other side also be heard’).

Reviel Netz’s chapter will probably please any reader as it pleased me. It deals with rather technical matters of geometry as cultivated by Archimedes and Liu Hui (third century CE). It is written in a straightforward and refreshing style, not devoid of suspense. In the conclusion, a fair attempt is made at indicating the possible reason for the difference between the two approaches: autonomy and abstraction in Archimedes against the dependence on tradition and commentarial approach in Liu Hui. One might only feel uneasy about the confessed fact that the author does not know a word of Chinese and has to depend on translations.

The contribution by Karine Chemla belongs to the most sophisticated ones in the volume. She focuses on the vexed issue of the perceived value of abstraction in history of mathematics. The chapter offers deep insights into complex technical matters, such as argumentation and calculation methods in Ancient Greece and China. Ultimately, it amounts to defense of traditional Chinese mathematics against prejudice.

Vivienne Lo and Eleanor Re’em come with a well-founded comparison of the application of aphrodisiacs and love spells in the two cultures. They open their chapter with a passionate apology for their beloved subject, and their call for a sexual revolution in academia is supported by pictures of bronze phalli and similar objects. Their conclusions regarding the presence of the phenomena both in Greece and China are, however, somewhat unsurprising. In any case, they present us a nice overall survey, though it at times might appear a little too cursory due to its very broad scope.
The chapter by Liu Xinyi, Evi Margaritis and Martin Jones is dedicated to the social context of food. The topic itself is well chosen and the archaeological data presented here are interesting indeed. I am only afraid that given the relatively modest length of the text, it is somewhat too all-encompassing to be compelling, and especially the part concerned with written records appears rather sketchy. Thus, I would say that the most important observations are the non-comparative ones, regarding the intra-continental and inter-continental connectivity and gradual food globalisation along with long-distance crop movements.

Michael Nylan’s contribution about the libraries in the Ptolemaic Alexandria and Western Han capital Cháng’ān is an extensive and meticulous documentation and revision of the facts obtainable from the scanty sources we have at our disposal, and it is written in Nylan’s typical self-confident manner with much scepticism, particularly on the part of Alexandria. The text is definitely a display of erudition, though I do not think there is enough evidence for the most radical claims regarding, for instance, the allegedly ‘subversive’ role and methods of imperial editors of earlier texts at the Han court, who are blamed for rewriting whole texts and ‘tossing out’ immense amounts of unique textual material (p. 392).

Finally, I enjoyed the afterword by Michael Loewe very much. It consists of a long list of perspicacious proposals for future comparisons that make much sense. One would almost say, sometimes they make even more sense than the comparisons taken up at the original conference and presented in the reviewed book.

In conclusion, one can appreciate a serious attempt at yet another comparative project, which in itself is highly welcome: the merits of inter-cultural comparison are undisputed and attractive. It is also another pleasant occasion to discuss all the pitfalls of the comparative approach. If the present volume was intended to dispel scholars’ concerns about Greece-China comparisons and to show that it can be done better than previously, it, in my opinion, has not fully succeeded. However, there would hardly be any progress in this demanding field without such endeavours. Many of my remarks may seem critical, but by and large, the book merits reading as well as thorough reflection.

References


Ziporyn, Brook (2009), *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.