

ROME AND CHINA IN COMPARISON

ROBINSON (R.) *Imperial Cults. Religion and Politics in the Early Han and Roman Empires*. Pp. x + 191, map. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £54, US\$83. ISBN: 978-0-19-766604-3.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X24000477

The Roman Empire and Han China were the most significant and influential states and empires in antiquity. In recent years there has been a proliferation of scholarly research on the connections between the Roman and the Chinese empires. These studies cover trade and maritime connections, coins and currency, the spreading of social ideas and the exchange of military knowledge. Another approach is a comparison based on imperial structures, administration, fiscal policies or narrative buildings dedicated to imperial visions of the past or the emperor's biography. The book under review focuses on the comparison of imperial cults in both empires.

The central point of R.'s study is the religious turn or the way in which ceremonies and rituals led by authoritative and charismatic emperors changed the shape and role of religion in the political context of Rome and Han. Her case studies focus on two rulers, Wudi¹ from Han and Augustus from Rome, and their innovations in religious institutions. The book is written from the perspective of comparative history, with a crucial concept being 'robust processes', borrowed from historian Jack Goldstone.

The book is organised into eight chapters. Chapter 1, the introduction, discusses comparative antiquity and issues of religion, providing a brief overview of sources, while Chapter 2, 'Transitions to Empire in Early China and Rome', underlines political changes in both entities prior to analysing the two emperors. Chapter 3, 'State Cult in Early China and Rome', is oriented towards organised religion, particularly cults, sacrifices and professional priest organisations. These first three chapters serve as an introduction to early China and Rome before Augustus and Wudi.

The following chapter, the most important in the book, titled 'Reshaping Religious Institutions', develops the idea of 'new men' as specially organised influential groups of religious individuals who gained political power and supported establishing new political agendas. These organisations are fangshi (方士) and priestly colleges. I agree with R.'s idea of imperial manipulation. Instead of a traditional understanding of religious organisations as powerful elements over the emperors, R. uses the opposite perspective: imperial usage of religious associations. Chapter 5, 'Expanding Influence', deals with positing new institutions within politics, the public sphere, and the role of imperial policies and politics. While Wudi used religious geography and the creation of a new political and religious landscape, Augustus employed his power to support new groups such as *quindecimviri*. Both emperors reshaped religious knowledge and authority.

The next chapter, 'Communicating Imperial Authority', examines how emperors spread their ideas through ceremonies and public buildings. Both emperors applied strong political marketing with different audiences and locations: Augustus focused on the city of Rome, while Wudi used a regional approach to multiple sites in the Han Empire. The penultimate chapter, 'Redefining Ceremony', concerns spectacles and rituals. Wudi reshaped and established new ceremonies based on local, regional and imported traditions with the ultimate aim of immortality and peace as part of his political purpose. Augustus

¹I use the form Wudi instead of Wu, preferred by R. Although the suffix -di could be translated as emperor, most English-language studies have the name as Wudi.

also reshaped traditional festivals for his new political reality. Both employed rituals for the promotion of a new era or ‘Golden Age’. The conclusion shows contrasting consequences – successful Augustan reform followed by Tiberius and less successful Wudian reforms related to complex political, military and social circumstances.

R. points out several benefits of comparative ancient studies, including attention to similarities (i.e. similar problems or circumstances) and dissimilarities (i.e. different cultural identities and backgrounds). This aspect is relevant for recent scholarship, particularly comparative antiquities, for several reasons. Firstly, it is practical and shows the potential of comparative antiquity, particularly from a textual – Classics and Chinese perspective. It is a good addition to historical (W. Scheidel, D. Engels, H.J. Kim, F.-H. Mutschler, among others), philosophical (J. Tanner, J. Yu, Z. Yao etc.) and archaeological comparisons between Rome and China. Secondly, R.’s book is oriented towards cults and rituals as a form of political life in both empires. The conceptual orientation on processes could be a way to bridge the gap in global and comparative antiquities (such as the fragmentation of different fields – Classics, Chinese studies, Persian studies, archaeology, art history within educational institutions, the limitations of local case studies, or issues of dozens of ancient and contemporary languages). Finally, R. chooses to put both empires together in the same chapters, which is useful as a method for comparative studies. In recent decades, scholars from the United States and Canada have started several projects: the Stanford Ancient Chinese and Mediterranean Empires Comparative Perspective Project from 2005–2014 led by W. Scheidel, the Global Antiquities Project, which is still ongoing, led by H. Beck and G. Vankeerberghen (McGill University), Comparative Antiquities at Princeton University led by M. Kern. There is also a series of edited books initiated by the University of Chicago and published by Oxford University Press such as C. Brittenham (ed.), *Vessels: the Object as Container* (2019), J. Elsner (ed.), *Figurines: Figuration and the Sense of Scale* (2020) and J. Elsner (ed.), *Landscape and Space: Comparative Perspectives from Chinese, Mesoamerican, Ancient Greek, and Roman Art* (2021). Finally, there is the Global Antiquity initiative at UCLA. At the same time, in April 2018, Peking University (partnered with the International Centre for Chinese Heritage and Archaeology, Society for Chinese Archaeology, University College London) organised a conference ‘Materialising Empire in Ancient Rome and Han China’. These approaches are usually a collection of diverse regions (Chicago, UCLA, Princeton) or comparisons of materials written by two different experts (Peking). The exceptions are McGill and Stanford, and this pattern is followed by R. The importance of this method and style is crucial because it shows the largest possibilities for comparative antiquity.

The book’s style is clear and readable, and the argument is easy to follow. I strongly advise a Chinese translation of the book, particularly for the mutual understanding of comparative antiquity for Chinese audiences and scholars. In addition, it would be useful to think about other Asian languages – Japanese, Korean, Arabic, Farsi. This could be an inspiration for similar research on different political entities (Persia, India, Korea, Central Asia etc.).

Beijing Foreign Studies University

GORAN ĐURĐEVIĆ
goran.djurdjevich@gmail.com