Comparing Medieval China and Europe: Reflections and Questions from a Western perspective

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Introduction

Let me introduce this essay with a personal note. When I was living in Taiwan (more than 20 years ago), I sometimes came across events in my neighbourhood that reminded me of things I had studied in Western medieval society. It could be the bustle of an ancient and vast temple, such as Longshan Temple in Taipei, where people not only offered incense but also played chess, held discussions and took part in political assemblies: I was experiencing what medieval sources say about churches, that were places of individual prayer and solemn rituals, but also places where people spent the night, debated and argued… Lived experience led me to think about comparing societies in Ancient/Medieval China and Europe.

In this paper I want to share some ideas and questions about such a comparative history. It will inevitably be brief. On the one hand, the very idea of comparison in general requires much deeper reflection than I can give here. On the other hand, I will not be able to present all the contours and issues of a comparative history of medieval China and Europe, especially as I am not a specialist in Chinese history.

The points I intend to develop are as follows:

- The global turn in medieval history

- Comparative history and the Middle Ages

- Some problems raised by a comparative medieval history

- Comparing medieval China and early medieval Europe

This series of reflections will then lead me to offer some final thoughts.

The global turn in medieval history

Over the last forty years or so, history has taken a “global” turn.

So we may now talk about “global history”, “world history”, “connected histories” and so on.[1] One of the common foundations of these historiographical currents is the desire to move away from the Eurocentric perspective, or at any rate to no longer consider that the role played historically by Europe was inescapable and somehow unique.

History’s global turn first concerned the modern period. It is only in the last twenty years or so that this global turn has begun to be assimilated by medievalists, and there is no doubt that the “Global Middle Ages” has not yet reached maturity.[2]

Meanwhile three journals have emerged for this new field : *The Medieval Globe*[3], *Medieval Worlds*[4], and *The Journal of Medieval Worlds* (it is regrettable that publication of the latter was suspended in 2021[5] – it seems, thus, that many plants are growing in the “global medieval garden”, but that some are not resisting the intense warming of this historiographical sector…)

Large medieval conferences have also been dedicated to the new trend. In 2016, the French *Société des historiens médiévistes de l’Enseignement supérieur public* (certainly the largest medievalists’ society in the French-speaking world) discussed the theme “World history, scale interplays and connected spaces”.

For once, French historians were ahead of their North American colleagues: it was only in 2019 that the *Medieval Academy of America* dedicated its annual meeting in Philadelphia to “The Global Turn”.

Research groups include the American research network *The Global Middle Ages* (based at the University of Texas at Austin), and the British research network *Defining the Global Middle Ages* (based at Oxford University), to which we can now add the *Comparing Medieval Histories Research Group*, composed by historians based in Taiwan, China and Europe[6].

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[1] Despite attempts at definition, global history is still not clearly delimited; in English, it is quite commonly confused with World History; there are even historians, who very recently suggested that global history includes “any approach (World History, Comparative History), which is not narrowly focused on a cultural area or a country (cf. Stanziani, Alessandro. *Les entrelacements du monde. Histoire globale, pensée globale: XVI^e^ - XXI^e^ siècles*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2018, 11). In any case, this kind of historiographical approach is currently very present in scientific institutions: journals, university chairs and departments etc.

[2] 2 groundbreaking works were : Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* (1989), and Lieberman, *Strange Parallels* (2003) ; until recently, they were relatively isolated studies.

[3] Published since 2014. ISSN – 2377-3561 (print) or 2377-3553 (online).

[4] Published since 2015. ISSN Online: 2412-3196 ; ISBN-13: 978-3-7001-9729-4.

[5] An older journal, *Medieval Encounters*, which concentrated in the past primarily on interfaith encounters in the Mediterranean, has enlarged its scope to study “the interactions of Jewish, Christian and Muslim cultures during the period from the fourth through to the sixteenth century C.E.”, the term “culture” being defined in the widest sense. *Medieval Encounters* : online ISSN: 1570-0674 ; print only ISSN: 1380-7854.

[6] The author of the present essay is part of this group.

Articles, special journal issues, and edited anthologies on aspects of the global Middle Ages have also become increasingly common over the past decade, particularly in the fields of history, art history, and literary and cultural studies.[7] There are now also introductory works on the topic: the first short volumes in the "Cambridge Elements series in the Global Middle Ages"; the online *Encyclopedia of the Global Middle Ages*[8], and *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*[9].

This "globalization" of the Middle Ages (or more generally of the pre-modern era) calls for some in-depth reflection on its underpinnings.

First, of course, there is the question of terminology: "the Middle Ages". I'll come back to that in a moment.

Then there is the question of how to understand "global", particularly in contrast to the globalised world of today. Here the keyword seems to be "interconnectivity" :

> "the world's *interconnectivity* as a form of globality… better retains a sense of the variety and the specific character of the global interconnectivities of all those earlier eras, without yoking all to a single relationship with contemporary globalization and forcing a resemblance."[10]

And this is indeed the choice made by Erik Hermans, the editor of *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, which aims at "looking at the globe from the perspective of human connectivity", since in that period "the one phenomenon that … did take nearly global proportions was connectivity."[11]

Comparative history and the Middle Ages

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[7] See for example the special issue of Past & Present (2018) on The *Global Middle Ages*.
[8] This works is being jointly published online by ARC Humanities Press and Bloomsbury : https://www.bloomsburymedievalstudies.com/category-list?docid=bmsency.
[9] Erik Hermans, *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*. Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2020.
[10] Heng, Geraldine. *The Global Middle Ages : An Introduction.* 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 38.
[11] Hermans, *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, 6. "… looking at the globe *from the perspective of human connectivity*, the most compelling chronological boundaries of the early medieval period are probably the eruption of the Ilopango volcano in Mesoamerica in 536 CE and the landing of Norse Vikings in Newfoundland around the year 1000 CE. The former event had long-term climatic ripple effects across Afro-Eurasia and thus had an indirect but fundamental influence on the history of large parts of the early medieval globe. The latter event is the first instance of archaeologically attested human contact between the continents of the eastern and western hemisphere since the Palaeolithic era" (*ibid.*, 4).

The notion of comparative history has existed for much longer than that of connected history or global history. I will focus here on just a few medievalists who have taken an interest in this subject.

In a certain sense, history is essentially comparative, as Chris Wickham explains :

> "I don't think you can properly do history without … [comparison]. Some of this comparison is chronological, and historians are used to it simply because they recognize that they study change, and thus know that they have to confront before vs. after".[12]

In fact, "a certain comparatism was part of the methodology of history from its beginnings as a scientific discipline, but it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the term itself received its consecration. The First International Congress, held in Paris in July 1900, was explicitly entitled 'Comparative History'." Nonetheless, "comparatism in history was by no means unanimously accepted by … professionals. The discipline was still largely dominated by national history, and even by a nationalist perspective".[13]

When it comes to presenting and promoting comparative history, a programmatic article by the famous French medievalist Marc Bloch is almost always quoted in discussions on the topic : the title is "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes" (*For a comparative history of European societies*).[14]

For William Sewell, "…Bloch's article … is still one of the most intelligent and compelling theoretical treatments of the subject."[15]

Marc Bloch refers in his article to Henri Pirenne's opening speech at the previous International Congress entitled "De la méthode comparative en histoire", (*On the comparative method in history*, 1923), as well as to an earlier article by Charles-Victor Langlois in the *English Historical Review*

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[12] Wickham, Chris. Problems in Doing Comparative History. In: Skinner, Patricia (ed.). *Challenging the Boundaries of Medieval History: The Legacy of Timothy Reuter*. Studies in the Early Middle Ages 22. Turnhout : Brepols, 2009, 6.

[13] My translation from Peter Schöttler, "Marc Bloch et la comparaison historique" : Schöttler, Peter. "Bloch". In Delalande, Nicolas, et al. (ed.). *Dictionnaire historique de la comparaison*. Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2020. https://doi.org/10.4000/books.psorbonne.87095.

[14] Bloch, Marc. Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes. *Revue de Synthèse historique* 46, 1-3 (1928): 15-50, doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/24199893-0460103003. It was originally a paper presented at the VI[th] International Congress of Historical Sciences held in Oslo in 1928, and published shortly afterwards in a longer version in the *Revue de synthèse historique*.

[15] Sewell, William H. Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History. *History and Theory* 6, no. 2 (1967): 208. https://doi.org/10.2307/2504361.

comparing the Middle Ages in France and England[16]. What makes his approach very different, however, is his acute reflection on the methodological conditions and on the risks and problems posed by ambitious comparatism, which does not prevent him from stressing that "the future of our science is at this price"[17].

Clearly, the real comparative history according to Bloch is that which crosses national borders by looking either at two societies separated in time and space by very great distances, so that an immediate mutual influence can be ruled out; or at societies which are apparently close and even "synchronous", but which nevertheless are different. It is this second type of comparison, "more limited in its horizon", that he himself prefers, because it is "scientifically the richest"[18].

Marc Bloch pays a great deal of attention to the problems raised by vocabulary, which differs from one language to another, including scientific language : unlike most other disciplines, especially the natural sciences, history does not have a unified terminology, so much so that European history, according to Bloch, "has become a Tower of Babel"[19]. This is why he advocates a "reconciliation of [national historical] terminologies and questionnaires"[20].

Marc Bloch returned to the need for comparison in one of his great books, *La société féodale* (*Feudal Society* : 1939)[21]. The last book of *Feudal Society*'s two volumes is particularly instructive. Here, Bloch revisits the term "feudalism"/ "feudalities", which has been, and is, used in many different meanings and contexts. He then summarises "The fundamental characteristics of European feudalism".

Finally, he proposes a "cut through comparative history", taking Japan as a point of comparison, since "it is not impossible, in itself, that civilizations other than our own have passed through a stage roughly analogous to that which has just been defined [European feudalism]"[22].

Bloch explains that from the 11th century onwards, Japan experienced a certain economic slowdown, the advent of a class of professional warriors above the peasantry, bonds of dependence (with a strong element of submission from the inferior to the superior), the distribution of tenures in exchange for the services of these warriors... all phenomena not unlike those we observe in medieval Europe. This is why – despite the summary nature of

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[16] Langlois, Charles V. The Comparative History of England and France during the Middle Ages. *The English Historical Review* 5, no. 18 (1890): 259–63. http://www.jstor.org/stable/546423.
[17] Bloch, *ibid.*, 16.
[18] Bloch, *ibid.*, 19.
[19] Bloch, *ibid.*, 48.
[20] Bloch, *ibid.*, 49.
[21] Bloch, Marc. *La société féodale.* Paris : Albin Michel (1st ed. 1939), 1983.
[22] Bloch, *La société féodale*, 610.

the comparison (and he acknowledges that the work itself exceeds that of a single man[23]) – Bloch can say: "Feudalism was not 'a once-in-a-lifetime event'. Like Europe - albeit with inevitable and profound differences - Japan went through this phase. Have other societies also gone through it? And, if so, under the influence of what causes, perhaps common ones?"[24]

Many years have elapsed since Marc Bloch's publications. Nevertheless, almost a century after the publication of Marc Bloch's article, we must agree with Timothy Reuter:

> "the majority of European medievalists seem to have been discouraged from historical … comparatism as a result of the failures of comparative studies of feudalism."[25]

On the one hand, the very notion of feudalism, its definition, its recognizable historical reality in the different regions of Europe, continues to be debated. On the other hand, the kind of collective work that Bloch considered necessary resulted in a rather disappointing example in the book edited by Rushton Coulborn, *Feudalism in History* (Princeton, 1956): this work brings together contributions from a dozen authors and covers an immense area, from Western Europe to Japan, from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia to Byzantium. Famous and still influential American orientalist Owen Lattimore – himself a proponent of comparative history[26] – gave a detailed critical analysis of the book and of its shortcomings[27].

Some problems raised by a comparative medieval history

Diversity of documentation

In his review of *Feudalism in History*, Owen Lattimore pointed out that "the contributors [of the volume] cannot write uniformly, because the historical material is not uniform"[28]. And in fact, as Chris Wickham explains,

> **"**The sorts of documentation provided by different parts of medieval Europe (even more so [by] non-medieval and non-European regions) is

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[23] Bloch, *ibid.*, 610.
[24] Bloch, *ibid.*, 612.
[25] Reuter, Timothy. Medieval: Another Tyrannous Construct? *The Medieval History Journal* 1/1 (1998), 41. https://doi.org/10.1177/097194589800100103.
[26] See Rowe, William T. Owen Lattimore, Asia, and Comparative History. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66/3 (2007): 759–86. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20203204.
[27] Cf. *Past and Present*, 12 (1957), 47-57. More positive reviews were published by the American sinologist J.R Levenson (see Levenson, Joseph R. *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15/4 (1956): 569–72. https://doi.org/10.2307/2941925.) and the German-American political theorist Friedrich, Carl J. in *American Political Science Review* 50, no. 4 (1956): 1136–38. https://doi.org/10.2307/1951350.
[28] Lattimore, cit., 47.

> hugely diverse; it is hard even to identify points of comparison if the material at your disposal is too different"[29].

Defining the "Middle Ages"

While the notion of feudalism has long been recognised as problematic, that of the "Middle Ages" has perhaps not to the same extent.[30] The fact remains, however, that in a comparative approach to "medieval" societies, the very usage of the term "Middle Ages" *is* problematic.

The problem lies first and foremost within European history and historiography, because the very idea of a period called "Middle Ages" did not appear until the late 14th century and the 15th century.

Nowadays, the chronological delimitation of the "Middle Ages" remains debated and subject to revision[31], but its beginnings and ends are generally situated around 450/500 and 1450/1500. For various reasons, the period has acquired a kind of generic unity, indicating a society with at least some specific characteristics despite all its transformations[32].

As we commonly talk about the "European Middle Ages", it should also be noted that the very idea of "Europe" is also a historical cultural construct (like that of "Asia").[33]

Naturally, the notion of the "Middle Ages", and the qualifier "medieval", are even more problematic once we leave the European framework to consider other cultural areas. The situation is further complicated by the fact that "medieval" is frequently considered equivalent to "feudal" and vice versa, both by Marxist (such as Tachigowa Micho) and non-Marxist (Lattimore or Coulbourn) historians.[34]

As Geraldine Heng puts it: today,

> "for Euromedievalists unreflexively to export the 'Middle Ages' to territories beyond Europe in naming chronologies in other zones of the world would thus inadvertently be a colonizing gesture by Euromedieval studies: the centrality of European time giving its name

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[29] Wickham, 8.
[30] See Reuter, 26.
[31] On the one hand, this is related to the spread of the notion of Late Antiquity, which has been extended to the 8th or 9th century, including both the eastern and western regions of the Mediterranean. On the other hand, a recent synthesis, the *Nouvelle histoire de la France*, has chosen to abandon the traditional division of early Middle Ages - Middle Ages – late/low Middle Ages, in favour of a single division between a First and a Second Middle Ages, distinguished by the turning point initiated by the Gregorian reform movement : see Mazel, Florian. *Nouvelle histoire du Moyen Age*. Paris: Seuil, 2021.
[32] See Reuter, 30.
[33] See Oschema, Klaus. *"Europe" in the Middle Ages*. Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2023.
[34] See Reuter, 40, and chapter 5 of Sergi, Giuseppe. *L'idée de Moyen Age : entre sens commun et pratique historique*. Paris: Flammarion, 2000.

> to asynchronous chronologies elsewhere, so that there is an Indian 'Middle Ages', an African 'Middle Ages', a Japanese 'Middle Ages', etc."[35]

In the case of China, according to the limited readings I have been able to make, the idea of a "Chinese Middle Ages" or a "medieval China" remains discussed :

> "China specialists have long debated the applicability of this patently Western concept to Chinese history. Some deny its utility outright. Many other scholars, though, assume that China had a medieval period. Yet amongst them, no consensus exists over when it started, how long it lasted, or what were its characteristics."[36]

English-speaking sinologists may define the "medieval" period of China in various ways: from end of Han Dynasty to end of Tang; from late Tang to early Ming; or as a period of around 6 centuries, coming to and end with the Southern Song (1176)[37]. One of the most comprehensive works recently published in English on the subject, *The Historical Dictionary of Medieval China*, covers the years 168-979[38].

For Tim Barrett, the notion of a Chinese Middle Ages has not yet really taken root. In a study of the divisions introduced into Chinese history by Chinese and Japanese scholars, he points out that they have identified different intermediate periods (different "Middle Ages") according to the needs of the moment, but that these divisions remain less real than the idea of the Middle Ages in Europe. As an example, let me quote Barrett on the Tang and Song periods :

> "Eras like the Tang and Song on close inspection do prove to be made up of some quite different strands, even if other strands prove common to both. But the fabric is never ripped apart into separate lengths ; as Chinese history unrolls, it remains of one piece."[39]

Comparing medieval China and early medieval Europe

For Keith Knapp, "China, from 200 to 1000 CE, did indeed experience a medieval period. This era possessed an astonishing number of characteristics normally associated with *early* medieval Europe (500 to 1000 CE). It shared many of these features not because of coincidence, but

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[35] Heng, 19.
[36] Knapp, Keith N. Did the Middle Kingdom Have a Middle Period?: The Problem of 'Medieval' in China's History. *Education about Asia*, 12/3 (2007), 12.
[37] Reuter, 39-40.
[38] Xiong, Victor Cunrui. *Historical Dictionary of Medieval China*. Lanham, Md: The Scarecrow Press, 2009, 2nd rev. et augm. edition : 2017.
[39] Barrett, Tim H. China and the Redundancy of the Medieval. *The Medieval History Journal 1*/1 (1998), 86. https://doi.org/10.1177/097194589800100105.

because both places had to cope with the migration of Inner Eurasian peoples… Of course, that is not to say there were not many differences".[40].

Consequently, Knapp lists features that, in his view, are common to both medieval China and early medieval Europe :

- a high level of political decentralization[41]

- "ruling élites who were usually hybrid products of different cultures"[42]

- "due to weak central governments and persistent chaos, a militarization of societies"[43]

- "members of the upper class were often connected through voluntary ties"[44]

- "involuntary subordination became widespread among commoners. During the medieval period, to protect themselves from armed men and onerous taxes, many commoners surrendered their status as free men and became permanent subordinates of powerful landowners"[45]

- "the appearance of manors — relatively large concentrations of land that provided most of the owner's needs. […] The lands of the estate were farmed by slaves, hired laborers, or servile tenant farmers"[46]

- "beginning in the second century, China witnessed for the first time the rise of organized religions in the form of Buddhism and Daoism".[47]

As to the differences between medieval China and early medieval Europe, Knapp explains :

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[40] Knapp, 12.
[41] "In short, during this nine-hundred-year period, China was often fragmented into short-lived régimes that governed only sections of the old Han Empire. How much power these governments wielded locally was also limited" (Knapp, 12).
[42] "That is to say, no matter what the ethnicity of a dynasty's ruling family, its institutions and values stemmed from both Chinese and Inner Eurasian traditions" (Knapp, 12).
[43] "From the second to eighth centuries, it is well known that many powerful families kept 'family soldiers' (*jiabing*) and 'bound retainers' (*buqu*) who served as their men-at-arms. As in Europe, the most important warriors were mounted and armored in iron. Even though the educated elite never relinquished their political and social prestige to a class of landowning warriors, literati were by no means strangers to warfare." (Knapp, 13)
[44] "These ties took three principal forms: current subordinates, 'former subordinates' (*guli*), and 'family disciples' (*mensheng*)" (Knapp, 13).
[45] Knapp, 13.
[46] Knapp, 13.
[47] "Both religions claimed autonomy from the government and its tax regime. Both had clerics ordained by their particular sect's governing hierarchy to administer to the laity's spiritual needs. Buddhists and Daoists established monasteries that, in their own right, became powerful landholding establishments and commercial centers. At the same time, though, Buddhist monks and Daoist priests vied for government patronage. Their prayers and blessings conferred legitimacy to rulers and protection to their regimes." (Knapp, 14)

- “the most important [difference] was that China never experienced the same level of decentralization”[48]

- “related to this point, the idea of a united empire never died in China, and strident regionalism never emerged”[49]

- “in China the upper classes continued to identify with the bureaucratic center rather than with their hometown”[50].

- “in China, learning and scholarship never lost prestige”[51]

- “due to the persistence of the bureaucratic style of ruling, medieval Chinese regimes were relatively stronger than their European counterparts”[52].

Another, more specific question is : In what sense can we talk of a period such as a Chinese “early Middle Ages” ? Here too, other scholars are much better qualified than I am to answer it (I’m thinking in particular of our colleagues at the *Society for Early Medieval Chinese History*). I will simply remark that the expression “early medieval China” is fairly common in English publications; you have for example *The Early Medieval China Journal* published by *The Early Medieval China Group*, an *Early Medieval China Sourcebook*[53], or a recent French volume dedicated to the *haut Moyen Âge chinois* in a new general history of China[54]. As is the case with this work, “early medieval China” generally refers to the period between the 3rd and 6th centuries (a period that others simply call “medieval”). Clearly, this “early medieval” China was not entirely contemporary with early medieval Europe, which traditionally extends from about the beginning of the 5th century to the 10th century. And like the phrase “medieval China”, “early medieval

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[48] “Bureaucratic governments that at least nominally controlled large territories continued to exist” (Knapp, 14).
[49] “No matter how small a regime might have been, its founder called himself an emperor (*huangdi*), not a lesser form of nobility. These sovereigns viewed themselves as the rulers of all of what once was Han China” (Knapp, 14).
[50] “Although there was a consciousness of the existence of regions, made evident in this era’s profusion of local and regional geography works, men of prominence continued to pledge their loyalty to national bureaucratic entities and expressed disinterest in local issues” (Knapp, 14).
[51] “While military men often founded dynasties, thereby obtaining important roles in politics and military affairs, they never commanded much prestige.[…] In medieval China, the mastery of weapons never outshone the mastery of words, at least not in the minds of the literati” (Knapp, 14).
[52] “Even though manors that harbored tax fugitives flourished, medieval governments often endeavored to register their populations, extract taxes from them, and limit their size” (Knapp, 14).
[53] Campany, Robert Ford, Jessey Choo, Yang Lu, and Wendy Swartz. *Early Medieval China : A Sourcebook*. Edited by Robert Ford Campany, Jessey Choo, Yang Lu, and Wendy Swartz. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014.
[54] Blitstein, Pablo Ariel, et Damien Chaussende. *Le haut Moyen Âge chinois : histoire générale de la Chine (220-589)*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2024. The volume covers the years 220-589 CE.

China" has also been subject to criticisms[55]. So, this is another point which we must keep in mind.

Necessity of case studies

If such discussions of chronology and terminology in relation to the medieval period, in China as well as in the West, are certainly of interest, they are probably not the most fruitful approach to comparative history. As Chris Wickham says, if we want to do comparative history, the "problem is pinning down what is actually significant to compare, and what is actually comparable: you need to compare like with like."[56] Consequently, the question is rather : what should we compare ? Should we "try to counterpose whole societies, in all their complexity, or [to] choose a single element and compare that?"[57]

Wickham's answer is :

> "In my view, single elements are the only practical way into fruitful comparison; if we try to set two complex social realities side by side, our focus tends to dissolve, and we tend to end up saying that they are both similar and different, which does not get us very far."[58]

The recent workshop organized in Geneva by the *Comparing Medieval Societies Research Group* just proved the point: it's not so much the chronological framework that must take precedence for a comparative approach to be fruitful, but rather the subjects taken into consideration; in any case, priority must be given to case studies.

I am a historian of culture and religion in Western societies in the early Middle Ages. Here are a few subjects ("single elements" in Wickham's terms) from my own area of expertise that I believe lend themselves to a comparative approach between medieval China and the West :

- the cult of saints and relics[59]

- hagiography and spiritual biographies

- monks /nuns and monasteries

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[55] Critical commentaries on this issue can be found in Wai Ho Wong's review of *Early medieval China: a sourcebook* (see above...), in *Asian Studies Review*, 41:1 (2017), 155-156 ; for a milder criticism of the periodization used in the same work, see the review by Williams, Nicholas Morrow in *T'oung Pao* 101, no. 1/3 (2015): 246-52.

[56] Wickham, 11.

[57] Wickham, 12.

[58] Wickham, 12.

[59] Cf. Shinohara, Koichi. Biographies of Eminent Monks in a Comparative Perspective: The Function of the Holy in Medieval Chinese Buddhism, *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies/ Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal / 中華佛學學報第七期*, 1994/07, 477-500. ISSN: 1017-7132.

- pilgrims and pilgrimages
- women of authority
- the notion of *consensus* in religious, social and political life
- epistolaries and letters' exchanges
- views about Barbarians

Some final thoughts

I think that it is pretty obvious that doing comparative history, and selecting China and Europe as regions of comparison, poses a number of difficulties and problems, but I would like to stress that it is also what makes it so interesting.

It is now clear that one of the crucial points is terminology ; language is by nature conceptually and politically freighted ; nonetheless, we should not be deterred by such constatation. As Geraldine Heng puts it,

> "to be able to speak at all among ourselves and to others, we have to agree to continue the use of conventional terms, but also to continue to critique these terms and highlight their problematic nature."[60]

As regards the very notion of a "Middle Ages" outside Europe, Timothy Barret makes this suggestive remark : "if [it] is shown to be in some sense distinctly arbitrary, should not this in itself stimulate further comparative reflection?"[61]

There is one point about comparative history that seems to me to be relatively unaddressed: that of the researchers themselves who engage in such an undertaking. Within the limits of my readings, I think I can say that the production of comparative or global histories of the Middle Ages in China and Europe has so far been carried out mainly by authors from the Anglo-Saxon world, or of Chinese origin but trained (at least from the doctoral level on) and based in Western institutions.

This can be seen in the project "Communication and Empire : Chinese Empires in Comparative Perspective" (Leiden, 2008-2016), a project completed by a team that included a number of China- and Taiwan-born doctoral students, apparently all based in the Netherlands or the UK. Among the participants in the workshop held in 2013 on "New Perspectives on Comparative Medieval History: China and Europe, 800-1600" organized by the "China and the Historical Sociology of Empire" research group, no speaker was of Chinese descent. Similarly, the members of the Oxford-based research network called "Defining the Global Middle Ages" apparently

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[60] Heng, 22.
[61] Barrett, 89.

include no Chinese scholar (i.e., no one based in China or Taiwan).[62] A book such as *Historiography and Identity IV: Writing History Across Medieval Eurasia* (edited by Walter Pohl and Daniel Mahoney[63]), includes only Western authors (according to their names, and apart from Qingjia Edward Wang, who is active in both the USA and China).[64]

With Timothy Reuter we must recognize the limits of historiographical practices confined within different cultural areas.[65] Chris Wickham developed and complemented this point with the following reflections:

> "If we want to get into the history of another region, we will of course expect to do it with the help of the historians who have already written about it, and who know its history better than we do. But the problem is that they may well be interested in wholly different things from us, and they may even have different assumptions about what causes what in history. […]
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> Secondly, we must gain an understanding of why it is that historians argue as they do in any given region; […] We must get inside national debates and be prepared to critique them; we must be prepared to translate, not just languages, but cultures. Not only critically, though; they may be right, and we may be wrong."[66]

As the reader will have noted, Wickham only considers the case of the individual researcher, who has to make the effort to "get inside national debates" etc. It seems to me that this is not feasible if we want to do in-depth work. On the contrary, it is necessary to form groups that include scholars from the different regions taken in consideration. One recent, positive example is that of Li Teng and Matteo Salonia, both based in China, who have jointly published an article on "The Regulation of Religious Communities in the Late Middle Ages: A Comparative Approach to Ming China and Pre-Reformation England".[67]

In addition to practical considerations (proficiency in different languages, in particular), I would like to conclude by emphasizing the value of a collaborative approach to history. Historians are men and women who seek to understand human societies of the past. When we work together, our differences and our human and scientific diversity inform the questions we ask and the way we address them. And this can only be beneficial to our approach to past human societies.

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[62] As of December 2024.
[63] Mahoney, Daniel, and Walter Pohl. *Historiography and Identity IV: Writing History Across Medieval Eurasia*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2021. Doi:10.1484/M.CELAMA-EB.5.118670.
[64] The same applies to other works.
[65] Reuter, 38.
[66] Wickham, 9.
[67] *Religions* 2020, 11, 606. Doi:10.3390/rel11110606.