

Editorial

Walter Pohl and Ingrid Hartl

The collection of articles we present in this issue has a longer story than usual. Many of them were first presented at a conference at Peking University in Beijing in June 2015, where Chinese and Western scholars met to explore possibilities of comparison between Chinese and Western empires and their peripheries. The proceedings were published in Chinese in 2017 under the title 断裂与转型：帝国之后的欧亚历史与史学 Duanlie yu zhuanxing: Diguo zhi hou de Ou Ya lishi yu shixue [Between Empires: Rupture, Transformation and Transmission], edited by Q. Edward Wang/Wang Qingjia 王晴佳 and Li Longguo 李隆国. The initiative to publish an English version came from some of the Western contributors, and took time to materialize. We are very grateful to Edward Wang and Li Longguo for acting as guest editors. They acquired the consensus of the authors, and also secured the rights to publish a translation from the Chinese press (上海古籍出版社, Shanghai gu ji chu ban she). Most of all, they managed to obtain the funding for the English translation, which they organized and supervised. Some authors replaced their papers by new ones, and many reworked their original versions.

We realized in the course of the process that this enterprise was quite unusual in the field. No doubt, comparison between China and the West has become rather frequent. Juxtaposing Western and Chinese empires – and particularly the Han and ancient Rome – is a well-established field. Walter Scheidel, for instance, has identified a ‘first great divergence’ between China and the West in the 7th century, when the Tang consolidated a unitary empire a few centuries after the fall of the Han, while the former Roman Empire would never be restored on the same scale again.¹ Ultimately, Scheidel used this argument to explain, once again, the success of the West, which according to him lay in its political multiplicity. More often than not, East-West comparison addressed Western questions and was pursued by Western scholars. Collaboration between Chinese and Western scholars on the subject has remained considerably less frequent.

This collection attempts to shift the perspective – the contributions were selected by the guest editors, and do not attempt to construct a comparative framework between East and West. Rather, the aim is to develop the dialogue between scholars from both sides of Eurasia. That also includes Chinese scholars working on medieval Europe, and a Western specialist, Nicola di Cosmo, addressing China. As readers may notice, this endeavour is not without problems. Translation from Chinese to English is a delicate matter, because the scholarly terminology builds on rather divergent linguistic and conceptual traditions. We are grateful to reviewers who have engaged in this effort and made valuable suggestions. In general,

1 Walter Scheidel, *Escape from Rome. The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity* (Princeton, 2019).

scholarly discourses and traditions diverge, and results are not always mutually accessible, as reviewers have also noticed. Long-established academic networks in the West still tend to offer better opportunities for the exchange of information than those available in other parts of the world. Therefore, the present collection of articles does not represent the results of institutionalised collaboration, but an early step in an emerging dialogue, in which Edward Wang and Li Longguo have acted as mediators. We are very grateful to them for having chosen *Medieval Worlds* for the present publication, and for having made it possible.