

Introduction

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Historical research grounded in comparative perspectives and methodologies has a long and esteemed tradition. In recent years, the emergence of global history as a dynamic genre of historiography has revitalized and expanded this tradition, providing fresh avenues for understanding the interconnectedness of the past. Among the five continents and seven oceans, the history of the Eurasian continent has played a pivotal role in shaping the course of world history. The »crescent« region of the Middle East, strategically positioned between Europe and Asia, not only serves as a bridge connecting the two continents but also as the cradle of world civilizations.¹

This central region gave rise to prominent ancient civilizations, including those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece. Similarly, in Asia, the Ganges and Yellow River valleys nurtured the early civilizations of India and China, respectively. By the second century BCE, three major empires – the Roman Empire in Europe, the Arsacid (Parthian) Empire in West Asia, and the Han Empire in East Asia – had risen to remarkable prominence, shaping vast swathes of the known world. However, starting in the third century CE, these great empires began to decline. The Han Empire collapsed in 220 CE, the Arsacid Empire was replaced by the Sassanid Dynasty (224-651 CE), and the Roman Empire endured the catastrophic »Crisis of the Third Century,« eventually splitting into Eastern and Western halves, with the Western Roman Empire disintegrating by 476 CE.

This series of imperial collapses ushered in what is often referred to as the »post-empire« period in Eurasian history – a transformative era marked by fragmentation, adaptation, and reconstitution. The articles in this special issue examine and analyze this crucial period, shedding light on its historical significance and enduring impact.

After the demise of the Han Empire in East Asia and the Western Roman Empire in Europe, the histories of Europe and Asia were fractured to varying degrees, with far-reaching consequences and implications. In the tradition of Chinese historiography, for example, historians have emphasized the importance of unified dynasties and their rise and fall. After the Han dynasty, however, the East Asian mainland was divided for over four centuries – an unprecedented period before and after – and became an anomaly in the pattern of dynastic succession. This period of division had a twofold impact on the subsequent historical development of the East Asian mainland. On the one hand, the unification of the empire was disrupted, leading to frequent wars, devastation, and a sharp decline in population. On the other hand, however, the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties saw a flowering of new cultural and intellectual ideas, along with the gradual economic development

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of the Yangtze River basin, which played an increasingly important role in subsequent historical development.

Similarly, the fall of the Western Roman Empire transformed the unified Mediterranean world into the fragmented landscape of medieval Europe, paralleling the changes in East Asia. Indeed, if the »post-empire« period was inaugurated by a great »rupture« in Eurasian history, it also experienced a great »transformation« in the periods that followed. After several centuries of fragmentation, for instance, the East Asian mainland achieved reunification under the Sui and Tang dynasties at the turn of the sixth century, which Chinese historians to this day commonly regard as a great revival of Chinese history. Through interactions with various ethnic groups both in the Mongolian steppes and in Central and South Asia, ancient Chinese civilization successfully underwent a transformation during the Tang dynasty, achieving a historical significance comparable to that of the Han dynasty. In Europe, the eighth century saw the rise of the Carolingian Empire (later evolving into the Holy Roman Empire). Charlemagne's empire (r. 800-814 A.D.) encompassed much of Europe and, though short-lived, its influence inspired later rulers to revive the Roman Empire. Indeed, the glorious appeal of the Roman Empire persisted. In the late ninth century, the Eastern Roman Empire experienced a robust revival and entered a period of prosperity.

Notably, historical »transformation« following the fall of empires seems to continue indefinitely. For example, after the Tang dynasty's demise in 907 CE and subsequent half-century of upheaval, the establishment of the Northern Song dynasty in 960 CE marked the end of this period of division and ushered in a new phase of transformation in Chinese history. Over its three-century reign (960-1279 CE), the Song dynasty witnessed many significant developments in Chinese history. Among these were three of the Four Great Inventions of Chinese civilization – gunpowder, the compass, and printing – born during this era. Meanwhile, the Holy Roman Empire, formally established by the Ottonian dynasty in the late tenth century, maintained close ties with the Eastern Roman Empire through intermarriage and cultural exchange. By the twelfth century, Christian civilization in Europe expanded aggressively to the north, east, and south. Politically, unified empires complemented feudal systems, economically, agricultural expansion and urban revitalization flourished, and culturally, the twelfth-century Renaissance emerged, accompanied by competition in constructing grand cathedrals. Medieval Europe gradually entered a golden age.

Significant historical changes thus unfolded across Eurasia in the »post-empire« period. While the Sui and Tang dynasties reunified the East Asian mainland, the Middle East experienced a parallel transformation with the rise of the Arabs in the seventh century. This era marked a profound shift, driven by the emergence of Islam under the prophetic mission of Muhammad (c. 570-632 CE) in the Arabian Peninsula. Following Muhammad's death, Arab tribes united under the Rashidun Caliphate (632-661 CE), initiating a rapid expansion beyond the peninsula. Within decades, Arab forces achieved remarkable conquests, toppling the Sassanian Empire and significantly reducing Byzantine influence in the region. The establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 CE), centered in Damascus, further consolidated Arab rule, institutionalizing governance and integrating vast territories into a cohesive Islamic polity.

It is worth noting that the Arab conquests were deeply intertwined with the legacy of the ancient Persian Empire in West Asia. The defeat of the Sassanian dynasty in the 630s and 640s not only marked the end of centuries of Persian imperial dominance but also facilitated the incorporation of Persian territories and administrative systems into the Islamic Caliphate. The Arabs inherited and adapted Persian bureaucratic traditions, including tax

collection and governance through regional governors, which played a critical role in managing the sprawling Caliphate. Moreover, the cultural synthesis between Arab and Persian traditions fostered significant advancements in art, science, and governance. Persian scholars, artisans, and administrators became integral to the burgeoning Islamic civilization, ensuring that while Persian political power waned, its intellectual and cultural legacy thrived within the framework of the Islamic world. This dynamic fusion of traditions not only enriched the Islamic Caliphate but also underscored the enduring influence of Persia on the evolving political and cultural fabrics of both the Middle East and West Asia.

In order to explore and address these interesting and transformative changes in the »post-empire« periods from the third century to around the twelfth century in a comparative and cross-cultural perspective, we organized an international conference entitled »Between Empires: Rupture, Transformation and Transmission,« which was held at Peking University's Zhongguanyuan Global Village from June 26-28, 2015. The conference was sponsored and co-sponsored by the Department of History, the Center for Western Classics and Medieval Studies, and the Research Center for Ancient Chinese History of Peking University, the Institute for Advanced Study and Princeton University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Vienna, with generous support from the Peking University Humanities Fund. Most of the papers in this special issue, especially those by Chinese contributors, were originally presented at the conference. After a round of revision, the conference proceedings, entitled *Duanlie yu zhuanxing: diguo zhihou de OuYa lishi yu shixue* (Between Empires: Rupture, Transformation and Transmission), was coedited by us and published by Shanghai Guji Chubanshe (Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House) in 2017. The Department of History, Peking University, generously provided funding for the translation of the English-language papers included in the book. With the publication of this special issue of *Medieval Worlds*, the Department has once again provided sufficient funding for the translation of the Chinese papers into English. We are immensely grateful for the Department's unwavering support of the project over the past decade. Of course, we are also very thankful to all the conference participants for their dedication and patience in revising their papers for this issue. It has been both an honor and a pleasure to collaborate with Walter Pohl and Ingrid Hartl of *Medieval Worlds* in bringing these papers to English-speaking readers. We also extend our heartfelt gratitude to Nicola Di Cosmo, Ian Wood, and Helmut Reimitz for their invaluable contributions of new papers to this special issue.

In concluding this introduction, we wish to reflect on the original conference theme, »Between Empires,« a phrase we find particularly evocative due to its dual temporal and spatial significance. Temporally, it highlights the historical transitions following the decline of the Han and Western Roman Empires, periods marked by profound transformations across Eurasia. Spatially, it encompasses a vast region stretching from East Asia to Western Europe, including South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia.

For decades, the medieval history of the West and the Han, Tang, and Song periods of East Asia have been central to scholarly inquiry worldwide. This issue and the original conference brought together leading experts to explore the histories of post-Han China and the post-Western Roman Empire from comparative and cross-cultural perspectives. Their papers examine a wide array of critical themes, including political upheaval and the reconstitution of order, cultural and ethnic integration and exchange, the interactions between the Han-Tang empires and Central and West Asian powers (such as the Sogdian merchants who traversed the legendary Silk Road), transformations in historiographical writing, and the reconstruction of historical consciousness in relation to cultural identity.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that several conference papers also explored histories within the expansive »in-between« regions that go beyond the traditional Sino-Western framework that has dominated Chinese historical scholarship. Their valuable studies point to the pressing need to move beyond conventional comparisons between China and the West, incorporating perspectives from Central and West Asia to enrich the study of Eurasian history during the »post-empire« centuries. These efforts align with the growing momentum of scholarship on the »Global Middle Ages,« a trend that continues to gain traction across diverse academic communities. By embracing this broader, more interconnected view of medieval history, we hope to better understand the complex dynamics that shaped Eurasia and its far-reaching global influence. We look forward to deepening our collaborations with colleagues worldwide in advancing this vital and transformative scholarly endeavor.