Early China and Ancient Rome

**Comparatively**

*By Jeffrey L. Richey*

_Instructed by the antiquary times, He must, he is, he cannot but be wise.*

William Shakespeare

**World history instructors constantly encounter the exhortation to teach Han dynasty China and the Roman Empire comparatively.** The reason for this is clear: teaching early China and ancient Rome comparatively invites students to calculate and evaluate what David N. Keightley calls the "costs and benefits" of "great civilizations" for themselves—not only explicitly, in terms of first-millennium antecedents, but also implicitly, in terms of third-millennium legacies.

Han China (c. third century BCE to third century CE) and Imperial Rome (c. first century BCE to fifth century CE) both were strong, centrally ruled regimes that expanded geographically, promoted the assimilation of ethnic and linguistic minorities, and provided lasting stability to their respective regions. They controlled populations and territories that were roughly equivalent in size, built roads, defensive walls, and waterworks, and were threatened by "barbarians" on their frontiers even as they employed such peoples as military auxiliaries. Finally, each of these ancient regimes subordinated religion to the interests of the state and experienced the introduction of a popular foreign faith (Indian Buddhism in China, Palestinian Christianity in Rome). To study these two early imperial cultures is to examine how human beings in widely separated geographical contexts coped with similar challenges and circumstances—an ancient lesson with poignant value for students and teachers in today's globalized world.

Yet such an examination must also include the divergent outcomes between the two cultures' experiences, which can be seen in their significant contrasts. Han China was based on rural agriculture, imposed uniformity through a common script, and ultimately asserted indigenous religious values over imported ones. In contrast, the Roman Empire was based on urban and maritime trade as well as agriculture, never became homogeneous except religiously, when the Empire eventually exchanged indigenous religious values for imported values, and never successfully imposed cultural uniformity, especially in written language. Thus, when the contemporary heirs of Han China and Imperial Rome are considered, it is no surprise that nationalist discourses and state authority play relatively greater roles in the People’s Republic of China than in the European Union democracies, where cosmopolitanism and corporate globalism seem to hold greater sway.

While numerous theoretical justifications for this comparative approach exist, seldom are such comparisons and contrasts actually attempted, either within world history survey courses or within more specialized courses on ancient civilizations. I was able to offer an entire course on “Ancient Empires: China and Rome” during the Berea College January 2006 "short term."

**Orientations and “Occidentations”**

Lack of student knowledge is one of the primary challenges for anyone who teaches about the ancient world. Thus, the first rule for teaching early China and ancient Rome is to take nothing for granted and assume absolutely no prior knowledge of either culture. Teachers must engage in both "orientation," helping Western students contextualize Chinese civilization in comparison and contrast with their own, and "occidentation," helping Western students come to grips with their own cultural foundations.

A good place to begin is with maps. Cosmography (mapping the world) typically expresses cosmology (theorizing about the world), and maps famously vary according to the mapmaker's cultural perspective. Premodern Asian and European maps are not particularly accurate, but are remarkably illuminating as documents of cultural identity vis-à-vis the known universe. Both the first century CE Roman *Orbis terrarum* and the fifteenth century CE Korean *Yoktæ chewang honil kangnido* locate their cultures of origin in the center of the world and depict other cultures on their own peripheries.

Another starting point is to look at how coins were produced in each culture. Roman coins, like their modern Western counterparts, tended to be solid disks of precious metal, such as silver, impressed with the images of rulers or other important cultural entities, including religious figures and formulas (e.g., the god Jupiter, "In God We Trust"). In contrast, ancient Chinese coins usually were disks of less precious metal, such as bronze, and included a square hole in the middle, around which auspicious phrases (such as reign names) might be inscribed. The total effect was similar to that of a Buddhist mandala. The coinage of early Chinese regimes did not change from ruler to ruler, except in the case of dynastic change. The *Qian Han Shu* (History of the Former Han, c. 90 BCE) notes that Westerners "make coins of silver, which have the king’s face on the obverse, and the face of his consort on the reverse" and also points out that "when the king dies, they cast new coins." Commentary such as this can be effectively used by asking students, What aspects of Western culture did Chinese chroniclers find worthy of commentary? What did they take for granted—and refrain from describing? What might be the rationales for the Chinese choices?
Bronze coin, reign of Emperor Wen Xuan (550–559 CE), Northern Qi dynasty

obverse
cháng píng wǔ zhū
“eternal peace / five measures”

reverse

mandala (cosmological diagram)

Silver coins, reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–180 CE)

obverse: Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE)
reverse: the god Jupiter

obverse: Faustina I (125–175 CE), consort
reverse: the goddess Venus

Coin photos and mandala illustration courtesy of Jeffrey L. Richey.
I introduce students in my course to three arenas of similar tensions and concerns: Confucian and Stoic writings about public and private rectitude, Taoist and Epicurean reflections on nature and humanity, and various Han and Roman texts on medical theory and practice.

In addition to contrasting spatial and aesthetic values, teachers can outline the broad historical similarities between the two cultures. The point here is, in the words of Michael Puett, to “[f]irst . . . locate similar tensions and concerns in the cultures in question and then . . . trace the varying responses to those tensions and concerns.” One commonality shared by Han Chinese and Roman elites was the tension between imperial values and institutions and their pre-imperial antecedents. Many upper class Chinese and Romans wanted to reconcile apparent tensions between the past and the present so as to help assure a lasting future for their social orders. Students need to become acquainted with the fact that even the early Roman emperors such as Augustus and their apologists, such as the poet Virgil, felt compelled to disguise their imperial ambitions by cloaking them in the guise of obsolete republican offices and titles. Also, early Chinese emperors such as Han Gaozu and their propagandists, the officially-sanctioned Confucian chroniclers, took pains to maximize their resemblance to the cultural heroes of China’s pre-imperial past. To fully appreciate this phenomenon, students must come to some understanding of the cultures out of which the Han dynasty and the Augustan imperium emerged.

Cultural Foundations

To locate such “tensions and concerns” requires a knowledge of both Chinese and Roman notions of their cultural foundations. Two excellent resources that offer a wide range of materials relevant to this topic are Kenneth J. Atchity’s anthology, *The Classical Roman Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and Win. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Vol. I: From Earliest Times to 1600*, second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Still, in most cases the pre-imperial story is told most authoritatively by imperial voices. Virgil and Livy wrote their versions of Rome’s past from the vantage point of life under the emperors, while Chinese sources such as the *Record of Rites* (*Liji*) and the *Classic of Documents* (*Shujing*) assumed their final form under Han rule. Making this clear to students can impart an important lesson about both culture and history: neither is usually accessible in some “pure” or “uncontaminated” form, and both tend to be available only through the filter or lens of later values and perspectives. Myth often is more powerful than history. To help my students see how myths of cultural heroes such as the Trojan prince Aeneas and the sage-rulers Yao and the Duke of Zhou played central roles in the constructions of imperial legitimacy and authority, and the development of Chinese and Roman identity, I assigned book six of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Atchity, 100–119) along with excerpts from the *Classic of Documents* (de Bary and Bloom, 29–37). Similarly, my assignments juxtaposed Han poet Jia Yi’s “The Faults of Qin” (de Bary and Bloom, 228–231), where he excoriates Qin dynasty founder Qin Shihang and his heir, with excerpts from Suetonius’ life of Julius Caesar (Atchity, 284–292), which is somewhat more even-handed in tone. This allows students to draw conclusions about the relationship between political realities, biography, and history. Students can also consider the interplay between historical figures such as the first Chinese emperor, Caesar, and mythical cultural exemplars such as Aeneas, Romulus, Cincinnatus, Yao, Shun, and the Duke of Zhou, with which they frequently were compared, either negatively or positively. Finally, modern Chinese mythmaking might be explained through showing Zhou Xiaowen’s 1996 film *The Emperor’s Shadow*. The film’s plot is based on Chinese chronicles about the first Qin emperor, his rise to power, and China’s unification. Similar subject matter has become rather commonplace in recent Chinese cinema, and its sudden predominance usually is explained as a result of reflection upon Mao Zedong’s legacy in the post-Deng Xiaoping reform era. Students who know something of contemporary China may be especially engaged by a discussion of whether and how tropes and traditions from early China survive into modern cinematic storytelling. Conversely, what should students make of their own culture’s recently-revived interest in their own classical heritage (e.g. the massively popular movie *The 300*) as a source of popular entertainment?

Indigenous Traditions

Since my expertise lies in early Chinese thought, and I have an interest in the Roman world, I naturally gravitate toward material on religion and philosophy. I introduce students in my course to three arenas of similar tensions and concerns: Confucian and Stoic writings about public and private rectitude, Taoist and Epicurean reflections on nature and humanity, and various Han and Roman texts on medical theory and practice. I pair Dong Zhongshu’s Confucian apology for Han power (de Bary and Bloom, 295–301) with excerpts from Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* (Atchity, 314–319), and juxtapose selections from Guo Xiang’s commentary on the *Zhuangzi* (de Bary and Bloom, 386–390) with portions of Lucretius’ poetic summation of Epicurean doctrine (Atchity, 82–87). Students might be asked to compare and contrast Dong’s and Aurelius’ understandings of fate and its relationship to both individual and social welfare, or contrast the accounts of Guo and Lucretius on natural processes and the place of humans in nature. What makes Dong or Guo “Chinese?” What makes Aurelius or Lucretius “Roman?” Once students have some sense of Confucian, Taoist, Stoic, and Epicurean worldviews, the time is ripe to offer another cinematic treat: Ridley Scott’s 2000 hit *Gladiator*, which remains popular almost a decade after its theatrical release. Although many students already know the film, the early sequences of which feature the late Richard Harris as Marcus Aurelius, appreciation can be deepened by asking them to identify Stoic and Epicurean themes in the characters’ dialogue and motivations. Moreover, student comparative sensibilities can be stimulated by having the class evaluate the film’s scenarios in Confucian or Taoist terms. How would Dong Zhongshu or Guo Xiang review the movie, and why?

We particularly enjoyed considering ancient Chinese and Roman medical texts. I assigned a variety of excerpts from Han medical texts (de Bary and Bloom 273–278, 346–352) alongside excerpts from writings of the Roman physician, Celsus (Atchity, 184–189). Students were then presented a set of fictitious, but representative, “case histories.” One seventy-five-year-old male “patient,” for example, complained of chills and liver difficulties during warm but cloudy spring days on which an inland northerly wind prevailed. Following Han diagnostic procedures, one student team identified the cause of this patient’s ailments as an excess of *yin* (dark, moist, female, receptive) energies in
the body and prescribed the application of heat to his feet, contact with fowl and red-colored objects, and consumption of beans and bitter food, and recommended that sheep, wheat, sour foods, and the color green be avoided while the patient waited for the arrival of more healthful summer weather. A second student team, citing Celsus’ manual, blamed the inland northerly wind for negating the ordinarily salutary effects of spring and advised the patient to petition the gods for a change of weather (from cloudy and warm to clear and cool), similarly counseling him to be patient and await the advent of summer. This game of “Ancient E.R.” both amused and edified, insofar as students found correlative and causative links between weather, diet, and illness that were both comical and commonsensical. It also provoked serious discussion of whether and how moderns are any less “primitive” than their ancient forebears in relying on faith healing, prayer, and other “magical” practices in lieu of, or alongside, “medical” techniques.

The worlds of ancient China and Rome often were colorful and earthy, and we should not present these societies as overly formal or stuffy. Popular traditions and practices arguably are more representative of Han and imperial Roman cultural life than the erudite musings of Confucians or Epicureans. Most teachers will find the chapters on Han popular religion (7, 9–10) in Mark Csikszentmihalyi’s Readings in Han Chinese Thought (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2006) and the sections on Roman household shrines (102–103), festival calendars (61, 71–74), and oracles (179–193, 261–273) in Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price’s Religions of Rome, Volume 2: A Sourcebook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) helpful tools in understanding common spiritual beliefs and practices. Such popular traditions are not only important for the sake of enabling students to acquire a realistic sense of the cultures in question, but much like the “Ancient E.R.” exercise described earlier, also can provide enormous classroom enjoyment.

**Imported Religions**

The encounters of both China and Rome with foreign faiths were crucial in shaping subsequent religious history of their successor cultures and epochs. Had fourth century Roman emperors not embraced Christianity, would the West have survived as a cultural entity distinct from, for example, the Islamic world? Had ninth century Chinese emperors not persecuted Buddhism, would the later “Neo-Confucian” revival and subsequent “Confucianization” of East Asian states and societies have occurred? If the “apostate,” anti-Christian emperor Julian (r. 361–363) had ruled for more than a few short years, might the medieval West have returned to the polytheism of its pagan ancestors, and thus looked more like modern India than modern Europe or North America? If Buddhism had replaced Confucianism permanently as the Chinese state ideology during the Tang dynasty, might China have proved more receptive to other foreign faiths, such as Christianity and Islam, in medieval and early modern times? Such counterfactual speculations can play an important role in the comparative teaching about early China and ancient Rome. They cannot do so, however, without adequate grounding in the factual sources related to the importation of Buddhism from India to China and of Christianity from Palestine to Rome.

To get at these facts and their interpretations by Chinese and Roman commentators, I assigned the various attacks on and apologies for new religious movements available in translation. These texts may generate a number of useful questions. What strategic similarities exist when comparing the Buddhist convert Mouzi’s contrast of indigenous traditions with Buddhism with the Christian convert Tertullian’s writings on indigenous Roman religions and Christianity? How do defenders of indigenous traditions such as the stalwart Confucian official Han Yu (de Bary and Bloom, 583–585) and the pagan historian Tacitus respond to the challenge of foreign ideas and practices that are gaining in popularity in the imperial capitals? Even where Chinese and Roman rulers disagree in matters of policy toward imported religions—as in the case of the Tang emperor Wuzong, who proscribed Buddhism (de Bary and Bloom, 585–586), and Constantine the Great, who prescribed Christianity—what can be learned from the tensions and concerns that each articulates regarding religion and the state? Finally, how do rival traditions that are not affiliated with the state, such as Taoism in China and Judaism in Rome, tend to relate to the success of the imported and the suppression of the indigenous?

These questions, which are not at all counterfactual but in fact crucial for the cultures in question, can be enlivened for students by another round of role-playing. In this case, I presented students with a dispute between Chinese and Roman subjects living in a Silk Road trading center under Parthian jurisdiction. In my imaginary Silk Road oasis city, some (Confucian or perhaps Taoist) Chinese objected to the proselytization taking place among Chinese by Buddhists, while some (pagan) Romans took offense at the evangelization efforts of Christians among their population, and all four parties turned to me (the Parthian governor) for arbitration of their disputes. While the historical likelihood of such a scenario is dubious, this did not prevent students from engaging imaginatively and productively in an exercise that I, in yet another nod to television drama, labeled “Ancient People’s Court.” Students freely borrowed appropriate arguments and counter-arguments from assigned primary sources, and our classroom-cum-courtroom proceedings brought forth light as well as heat. While justice may not have been served, at the end of the day, students had a fresh and vivid understanding of the issues at play during this formative period in both cultures’ religious histories.

**When Empires Collide**

The hypothetical Parthian courtroom drama set the stage for the course’s final unit on encounters between early Chinese and ancient Romans. At this point, the limits of the primary-source anthologies that I had selected became apparent, and I increasingly turned toward online and other resources to address the often shadowy contacts between East and West that took place through the myriad trading networks collectively known as the Silk Road. It also was at this juncture that my limits as a specialist in China rather than Rome became more obvious, at least to me. Consequently, classroom discussion from this point onward tended to focus on Chinese perspectives on Rome rather than vice versa. The somewhat one-sided nature of the material notwithstanding, students managed to acquire some sense of the historical and cultural issues at work in this prolonged, episodic, process of encounter. Just as importantly, they were able to integrate and apply their cumulative knowledge of both Imperial Roman and Imperial Chinese civilizations to understanding this process.

Having reviewed various Chinese chroniclers’ impressions of the Romans (and their Central Asian middlemen), students discovered a Chinese tendency to project Confucian utopianism upon the West and see Western culture as exemplifying cardinal Chinese values and virtues. The Hou Han Shu (History of the Later Han, c. fifth century CE) claims that Western “kings are not permanent rulers . . . they appoint men of merit” and that Western polity honors the Confucian principle of tianming (heavenly mandate): “When a severe calamity visits the country, or untimely rain-storms, the king is deposed and replaced by another.
The one relieved from his duties submits to his degradation without a
murmur. The inhabitants of that country are tall and well-proportioned,
somewhat like the [Chinese] . . .” At the same time, students detected a
change over time in Chinese views of Western religion. The sixth cen-
tury CE Song Shu (History of the Song) credits “the doctrine of the ab-
straction of mind in devotion to the Lord of the World [i.e.,
Christianity]” with “having caused navigation and trade to be extended;”
while the eighth century CE Nestorian Christian stele claims that in
Christian lands, “robberies are unknown . . . and the people enjoy peace
and happiness. Only the luminous [i.e., Christian] religion is practiced;
only virtuous rulers occupy the throne.” Not long after this stele was in-
scribed, however, the Tang government proscribed Christianity (along
with Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and other foreign faiths), and by the
eighteenth century, the Ming Shi (History of the Ming) chronicler was
able to write about Christianity with some skepticism:

A native from the great western ocean [i.e., Jesuit missionary
Matteo Ricci] came to the capital who said that the Lord of
Heaven [i.e., Christ], Yēsū [Jesus], was born in [Judea] which is
identical with the old country of [Rome]; that this country is
known in the historical books to have existed since the creation
of the world for the last 6,000 years; that it is beyond dispute the
sacred ground of history and the origin of all worldly affairs;
that it should be considered as the country where the Lord of
Heaven created the human race. This account looks somewhat
exaggerated and should not be trusted.

Given the Christian conservatism of the region in which I teach,
not to mention the exalted position enjoyed by Christianity in the
United States generally, my students’ encounter with pre-modern Chi-
nese infatuation, indifference, and skepticism regarding their culture’s
preeminent religious tradition could be amusing or abrasive, but above
all, it was enlightening, insofar as it raised a number of questions. Had
the Romans known anything of Chinese religions, what might they have
said or done in response? Why do Chinese records seem to testify to a
greater (if still very incomplete) knowledge of the West than is the case
about the sage-kings of antiquity, and serve similar purposes. In gen-
eral, quite a few students voiced the opinion that we now live in a kind
of late Han or late Roman era, although they could not agree on the
identity of the “barbarians” massing outside the empire’s borders or the
culpability of the regime in bringing us to this point in history. Much
of the current national debate about whether the United States repre-
sents a new imperium has focused on the precedents of British and So-
viet power, but my students’ experiences suggest that this public
conversation could be enriched by greater reference to ancient empires
such as those of China and Rome. Such references are all the more
poignant, given the apparent return to imperial power by the modern
Chinese state after nearly a half-millennium of decline.

Student responses to the second question, What do you think is the most striking difference between early China and ancient Rome?,
however, revealed that stereotypes of East and West are difficult
to root out. Many identified the most striking difference between
early China and ancient Rome in terms of broadly sketched value
dichotomies:

The Chinese seem to value virtue above fame; the Romans
are all about conquest.

The Chinese focus on harmony, while the Romans focus on conquest.

The ideals of the Confucian classics (virtue) were very
different from those presented in the Aeneid (power
through conquest).

This “East is East and West is West” view of the two imperial cul-
tures did not frame all student perceptions, however. Some respon-
dents pointed out that Rome began with a quasi-democratic social
order, even if it rejected it in the end, while China never possessed in-
stitutions comparable to the Roman senate or consulate. Others saw
Rome’s cosmopolitanism as a function of its central location in a mar-
itime trade network and attributed China’s relatively more xenophobic
and conservative cultural orientation to its roots in an inland river val-
ley civilization. Both observations may be routine among more expe-
rienced scholars of Old World antiquity, but this does not detract from
the value of the students discovering these points of difference for
themselves through an examination of primary documents in cultural
and historical context.
Conclusion
I believe two major benefits may be derived from teaching early China and ancient Rome comparatively. Such an endeavor not only promotes the basic goals of world-historical education (to acquire knowledge of facts and judgment regarding their interpretation), it also helps equip students not only for an understanding of the past, but also for informed engagement with the present and future. We who now live in a world defined by these foundational empires and their successor civilizations should seize every opportunity to learn about our cultural origins so as to preserve their accomplishments while avoiding their mistakes. On this point, we may find ourselves in agreement with both our early Chinese and our ancient Roman forebears, each of whom knew the world of the dead as a rich resource for the living.

NOTES
2. I gratefully acknowledge the encouragement and insights shared with me by Andrew Chtitchik, David Cohen, Ruben Dupertuis, Lucien Ellington, Robert W. Foster, Grant Hardy, Robert W. Hoag, David G. Johnson, Gary C. Johnson, David N. Keightley, Keith N. Knapp, Steven Shankman, John Svarlien, and my students. Two reviewers for Education About Asia also offered invaluable suggestions for the improvement of this essay.
4. A complete course syllabus and supporting materials may be found online at http://faculty.berea.edu/richey/ast217.html.
5. Images of these maps are available online at http://www.lietuvos.net/istorija/sarmetaisia/gemerskeliai.htm and http://www.answers.com/topic/kangnido, respectively.
19. Secondary Sources in English
21. See the excerpt from Tacitus’ Annals available online at http://www.csun.edu/~ehc/ll004/txtaam.html.
22. See the excerpt from Tacitus’ Annals available online at http://www.csun.edu/~ehc/ll004/txtaam.html.
24. For an example of Taoist “rebuttal by appropriation” see the Doctrine of the Three Heavens (de Bary and Bloom, 400–402); for a Roman-era Jewish response to the emergence and eventual separation of Christianity from Roman-era Judaism, see the late antique text known as the Toledoth Yeshu, available in English translation online at http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/%7Ehummen/topics/jewish/jesus/toledoth.html.
25. The rich selection of texts in English translation available online at http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/eastasia/romchin1.html is invaluable for teaching this material.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS
Map and Image Collections on the Web

Primary Sources in English Translation

Secondary Sources in English

JEFFREY L. RICHETY (PhD Graduate Theological Union) is Associate Professor of Religion and Director of the Asian Studies Program at Berea College in Kentucky. He is the editor of Teaching Confucianism (Oxford University Press, 2008), the author of numerous articles, book chapters, and encyclopedia entries on early Chinese thought, and the Chinese Philosophy Area editor for the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://www.iep.utm.edu). Through the Bluegrass Ancient Studies Seminar (http://faculty.berea.edu/richey/bas.html), an annual gathering of scholars in central Kentucky who work on material related to Old World antiquity, he remains engaged with the comparative study of early China and ancient Rome.