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Formations of Knowledge in Chinese Late Antiquity

Michael Puett

The concept of 'late antiquity' has been powerfully explored in recent scholarship on the larger Mediterranean world. However, surprisingly few attempts have been made to explore the formations of knowledge in China during this period from a comparable framework. This paper will be an attempt to do so by discussing the complexities of the ways knowledge was transformed in the first few centuries of the Common Era in China, and to frame the discussion in a way that will hopefully open up larger comparative questions.

Given the nature of the materials that we have from China – in some ways similar to those from the Mediterranean region, but in some ways quite different – such an exercise will hopefully help to open up larger historical questions. Are the models currently being debated for the exploration of late antiquity in the Mediterranean region helpful for thinking about this period in Chinese history, and, conversely, do the transformations occurring in the eastern end of Eurasia open up some possible approaches for thinking about formations of knowledge in the Mediterranean region? How, moreover, do we think about comparative history? If a notion of 'late antiquity' is helpful from a larger Eurasian perspective (and I think it is), how should we understand these larger transformations in Eurasia, and how can we helpfully think about transformations of knowledge from a comparative perspective?

1 The Concept of Late Antiquity

The notion of a "late antiquity" did not arise until the twentieth century. It was a direct product of the modernity narratives that had begun coalescing in Europe in the nineteenth century – and that have very much continued through the present. According to these narratives, history should be divided into a periodization of ancient, medieval, and modern. The break to modernity from the medieval period is, of course, the most important moment in these narratives. The precise content given to the medieval period varies according to the specific narrative in question, but typical characterizations involve claims that the medieval period was dominated by ritual, superstitious beliefs, pre-given social hierarchies, etc. The modern period, of course, was defined as a break from such a world of ritual and authority, with humans becoming able to make their own history.

The ancient period – the period that came before the medieval – was usually presented positively – it is what the medieval period destroyed and accordingly what had to be recovered and developed for the full flourishing of modernity. In

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perhaps the most common formulation, the ancient period was the first flourishing of human rationality – the emergence of philosophy, science, and democratic forms of governance. From this perspective, late antiquity would then be a degeneration of the world of antiquity – a degeneration that led directly to the medieval world.

Despite the fact that the concept arose in the midst of such teleological conceptions of history, it has recently been taken over by a number of historians explicitly concerned with rejecting such teleologies. Figures such a Peter Brown, Averil Cameron, Glen Bowersock, and Arnaldo Momigliano have explicitly re-thought the notion of late antiquity outside of the paradigm of degeneration and decline.[1] The result has been an intensive study of the social, economic, and religious patterns of the first several centuries of the Common Era, definitively taken out of the modernity narratives of an earlier generation. Instead of placing these centuries within a grand narrative of the eventual rise of modernity, the past several decades of scholarship have focused on the particular and the local to explicate the complex transformations of this period.

Given this history of the concept of late antiquity, and given the recent work that has been done to remove the concept from grand narratives of modernity, it is worth asking if the concept is helpful to use from a larger comparative point of view. In particular, it is worth asking if the concept is one that should be applied to the study of Chinese history. Considering the fact that the concept of 'late antiquity' arose as a piece of larger modernity narratives, it would seem directly akin to concepts like 'early modernity' – and I have explicitly questioned the use of terms like 'early modernity' for precisely this reason.[2] A concept like 'early modernity' implies an inherent teleology toward a modern world. Simply making it global does nothing to change the underlying teleological claim. So why would it be helpful to use the term 'late antiquity' in a pan-Eurasian sense?

The first part of my answer is that, in China, 'late antiquity' is actually an indigenous term, used by figures at the time to describe the world in which they were living. In the *Taiping Jing*, for example, in sections that probably date to the second century, one finds the following:

> In high antiquity, those who obtained the Way and were able to bring peace to their rule did so only by nurturing themselves and holding fast to the root. In middle antiquity, there was some loss; they made small mistakes in nurturing themselves and lost the root. In late antiquity, plans were not auspicious, and they regarded their body lightly, saying they could obtain

1 One of the most influential works in the re-thinking was Peter Brown's *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 1982. On the critique of the notion of decline and fall in particular, see Glen W. Bowersock, "The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome", in: *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 49.8 (1996), pp. 29–43. For a helpful collection of some of the key ideas of the subsequent re-thinking, see Glen W. Bowersock et al., *Interpreting Late Antiquity: Essays on the Postclassical World*, Cambridge Mass./London 2001.

2 Kathleen Davis and Michael Puett, "Periodization and 'The Medieval Globe': A Conversation", in: *The Medieval Globe* 2.1 (2016), pp. 1–14.

> another one. Thus, they greatly lost it [the root], and they brought chaos to their rule. Although this was the case, it was not the fault of the men of later antiquity. It arose from the dangers of inherited burden.[3]

The vision of history here is one of a gradual decline from a period of peace in high antiquity. In middle antiquity, errors started being made. As these errors continued to accumulate, the world fell into chaos. This is the situation of the era when the text is being written – an era of inherited burden, in which the errors of the past have accumulated to dangerous proportions. This is not, the text makes clear, the fault of the people of the current period – it is simply the product of living at the tail end of such an accumulation of errors. This era is explicitly called "late antiquity".

The term is thus an indigenous one in China in the second century, and, ironically, it is used with very much the same sense of decline that the term initially had in twentieth century scholarship on the Mediterranean region – the same sense, in other words, that a generation of scholars have tried to move beyond.

I will return soon to what the authors of the *Taiping Jing* recommended for their own era and what they thought would come next. But here let me emphasize the implications of such an indigenous usage for our own scholarly historiography. As is clear from this example, claims of 'late antiquity' can be made outside of modernity claims. Or, to be more precise, outside of the kinds of teleological modernity narratives that have been so dominant in 19th and 20th century Euro-American historiography – narratives that define modernity as a uniquely recent phenomenon.

On the contrary, modernity narratives are hardly unique to the Western world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, in early China, such narratives – as well as critiques of such narratives – were common. The emergence of the first empire in China in 221 BCE occasioned what I would like to call a "modernity moment" – a moment when one gets much the same vision of history commonly associated with the "modern" in the Euro-American world of the past two centuries. The self-proclaimed "First Emperor" explicitly announced himself to be breaking from a traditional world and initiating a radically new era of unity, rectification, and order.[4] As he stated in one of his inscriptions:

3 Wang Ming 王明, *Taiping jing hejiao* 太平經合校 (*Collated Edition of the Taiping jing*), Beijing 1992, 37.61. Here and throughout my translations have been helped immeasurably by those of Barbara Hendrischke in her, *The Scripture on Great Peace: The Taiping jing and the Beginnings of Daoism*, Berkeley 2007. My focus here and later will be on the dialogues between a Celestial Master and the Perfected. Most scholars agree that the content of this section belong to a later Eastern Han context. See the excellent summary by Barbara Hendrischke, "Early Daoist Movements", in: *The Daoism Handbook*, ed. by Livia Kohn, Leiden 2000, pp. 134–164, here: 143–145.

4 Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China*, Stanford 2001; Davis and Puett, "Periodization and 'The Medieval Globe'", pp. 9–10.

> It is the twenty-eighth year. The First Emperor has created a new beginning.
> He has put in order the laws, standards, and principles for the myriad things…
> All under Heaven is unified in heart and yielding in will.
> Implements have a single measure, and graphs are written in the same way…
> He has rectified and given order to the different customs…
> His accomplishments surpass those of the five thearchs…[5]

Although the empire that the First Emperor forged would fall soon thereafter, many of the same claims continued in the ensuing Han Empire. Indeed, the *Huainanzi*, an imperial text written in the second century BCE, makes claims concerning an "end of history" directly comparable to those seen in Hegel, and more recently Francis Fukuyama.[6]

Instead of accepting and taking at face value 19th and 20th century Euro-American claims modernity, historians should see such claims as being just that: claims, and claims directly comparable to those seen elsewhere at particular moments in world history. As a comparative hypothesis, I would like to argue that modernity moments are particularly common with the rise or dramatic expansion of empires. This certainly is true for 19th and early 20th century European thought, and certainly true for the kind of "End of History" arguments made in the United States after the end of the Cold War in 1989.

Claims of 'lateness', on the contrary, tend to occur when there is a sense of an end of an era. This is true, for example, with more recent claims that we are living in a period of 'late capitalism' – the implication, of course, being that the age of capitalism is reaching its end, and will soon be followed either by new era of peace (for example, communism) or (more commonly now) something cataclysmic (such as environmental collapse). And it is certainly true for the claims of late antiquity we have already seen in second century China.

Indeed, claims of modernity and claims of lateness are frequently paired, often quite literally, as in recent sociological arguments concerning 'late modernity',[7] but more often paired temporally. This was certainly true with twentieth century theories of 'late antiquity' in the 'late' Roman Empire beginning the decline that would ultimately be overturned with the rise of modernity. But the two can also be paired in the opposite chronology. As we have already seen, claims of 'late antiquity' appear in China in the second century CE, while claims of modernity appear several centuries earlier. Self-proclaimed modernity moments, in other

5 Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記, "Qin Shihuang benji" 秦始皇本紀, Beijing 1959, 6.245.

6 Michael Puett, "Sages, Creation, and the End of History in the *Huainanzi*", in: *The Huainanzi and Textual Production in Early China*, eds. Sarah A. Queen and Michael Puett, Leiden 2014, pp. 269–290.

7 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford 1991.

words, can also precede self-proclaimed late antiquity moments. Both are based upon a comparable vision of history – either a radical break from a self-proclaimed traditional past or a period of decline leading inexorably to a new beginning. It is much the same vision of history, with the difference largely lying on which side of the break one perceives oneself to be standing.

Once we finally stop accepting the "modernity" claims of the past two centuries at face value, we can start exploring "modernity moments" in world history, asking when and why they arise. And we can do the same for moments of perceived lateness. These can and should be comparative, analytic categories.

To return to the work of Brown et al. to rescue the understanding of the first few centuries of the common era in the Mediterranean region from narratives of decline. The effort is absolutely correct, just as it is correct not to take claims of modernity in 19th and 20th century historiography as the correct way to understand those two centuries. But this should not lead us to ignore the claims made in these periods. Certainly in China claims of lateness are pervasive in the first few centuries of the common era – clearly in the apocalyptic movements that begin emerging for the first time during this period, but, as we shall see, in other areas as well. Such claims were often made in relation to – sometimes against, sometimes returning to – the imperial claims of radically breaking from the past. Such claims are not good descriptors of what was actually going on, but the cultural resonance of such claims still needs to be explored.

What I would like to argue is that, just as the period of the emergence of empires in the last few centuries before the common era should be thought of in larger Eurasian terms, so should the period of the first few centuries of the common period.[8] Late antiquity, I would argue, was a pan-Eurasian phenomenon.

2 The World of Late Antiquity in Eastern Eurasia

To make the argument, let us first return to China. And return in particular to the *Taiping Jing*, the text mentioned above that labeled its own era to be one of 'late antiquity'. To quote again from the same text:

> Those in late antiquity have again inherited and carry on the small errors of middle antiquity, and they increasingly make them into ever greater errors… When it comes to summoning the dead, ghosts are not able to come and eat constantly, and yet the sacrificial offerings were nonetheless greatly increased, thereby exceeding the proper standards. Yin grows and overcomes yang. No one knows which ghostly and spiritual creatures repeatedly come to gather together and eat, indulging themselves and having their way, acting like dangerous thieves and killing people without end. When they kill a person, [the ghosts] see an increase in the service [i.e., an increase in the sacrificial offerings] and see no punishments. Why should they not

8 Michael Puett, "Early China in Eurasian History", in: *A Companion to Chinese History*, ed. by Michael Szonyi, Malden, MA 2017, pp. 89–105.

> continue [killing the living] with all their strength? As a result, pernicious energies grow daily. It all turns back and attacks the giver of the sacrifices.[9]

The errors we saw mentioned above included failures in the practice of sacrifice. By sacrificing too frequently, the ghosts have increased and begun attacking the living. The result is that the entire balance of the living and the dead has been destroyed:

> Living humans are yang, ghosts and spirits are yin… Therefore, when yin triumphs, the ghostly creatures join together to create horrors so profound that no words can describe it. This is called the arising of the yin, and the decline of the yang. It causes rule and order to be lost and endangers the living.[10]

The underlying vision of history in the *Taiping Jing* is apocalyptic. The self-proclaimed period of late antiquity is one of dangerous decline, leading inevitably toward a coming cataclysm.

At roughly the same time, another millenarian movement, the Celestial Masters, was similarly arguing that the accumulation of a series of disastrous practices on the part of humanity had resulted in a gradual descent of the cosmos into a coming apocalypse.[11] For the Celestial Masters as well, one of the key reasons for the decline has been the use of sacrifice. Only here the response is even stronger. If the *Taiping Jing* called for a restriction of sacrifice such that a proper balance between the living and dead could be restored, the Celestial Masters called for a rejection of sacrifice altogether.[12]

The response of both the *Taiping Jing* and the Celestial Masters was similar as well: a turn to a higher divine power.[13] With the Celestial Masters, the call was for humanity to follow the precepts revealed by the high deity Laozi, a beneficent deity who had created the cosmos and who provided revelations for how humans should properly live within it. Those who did so would become the seed people for the next cosmos that would be generated after the coming apocalypse.[14]

The sacred scripture revealed by the deity Laozi was the text known as the *Laozi*. According to a commentary written to the text and ascribed to the grandson of the founder of the Celestial Masters, the *Laozi* was a clear, direct text written such that its precepts could be easily understood and easily followed by human-

9 *Taiping jing hejiao*, 46.53.

10 *Taiping jing hejiao*, 46.50–51.

11 Terry F. Kleeman, *Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities*, Cambridge Mass. 2016.

12 Michael Puett, "Forming Spirits for the Way: The Cosmology of the *Xiang'er* Commentary to the *Laozi*", in: *Journal of Chinese Religions* 32 (2004), pp. 1–27.

13 Michael Puett, "Ghosts, Gods, and the Coming Apocalypse: Empire and Religion in Early China and Ancient Rome", in: *State Power in Ancient China and Rome*, ed. by Walter Scheidel, Oxford 2015, pp. 230–259.

14 Kleeman, *Celestial Masters*.

ity.[15] If humans stopped sacrificing and started following these precepts, they would survive the coming apocalypse and seed the new cosmos.

Similarly, the *Taiping Jing* called for the creation of a de facto scripture by putting together all of the previous revelations by the high deity Heaven.[16] These revelations had been misunderstood by previous generations (hence leading to the gradual decline), but if humans simply collated all extant writings and arranged them by category, they would add up to a single, clear statement: "If one has these follow one other by category and thereby supplement each other, then together they will form one good sagely statement."[17]

In both cases, the scripture based upon the revelations by a single beneficent deity would overturn existing, false ritual practices. And in both cases the revelations are in written form, purportedly offering clear guidelines that would need no interpretation and no explanation.

Some of these elements were not completely new. Anti-sacrificial movements had begun in China as early as the fourth century BCE, and calls for humans to follow the guidelines of a higher, benevolent deity who had created a moral cosmos were asserted by the Mohists in the fourth century BCE as well.[18] But the drawing of these elements into apocalyptic visions of history with a focus on revealed teachings are part of a formation of knowledge that emerges only during the first few centuries of the common era.

3 Eurasian Late Antiquity

Much of what we have seen in these examples from China have clear parallels in the late antiquity of the western end of Eurasia as well. A rejection of sacrifices and a turn to scriptures claimed to have been revealed by a high, purely beneficent divinity; the claim that such scriptures can be read directly, with minimal or no interpretation; the claim that the accumulation of human errors are leading to a coming apocalypse, which will be followed by a great era of peace – these are all well known to scholars studying the first few centuries of the common era in the Mediterranean region. Guy Stroumsa has in particular emphasized precisely these points as characteristic of the emerging religions of late antiquity.[19]

15 Michael Puett, "Manifesting Sagely Knowledge: Commentarial Practice in Chinese Late Antiquity", in: *The Rhetoric of Hiddenness in Traditional Chinese Culture*, ed. by Paula M. Varsano, Albany 2016, pp. 303–331.

16 Jens Østergård Petersen, "The Anti-Messianism of the *Taiping jing*", in: *Studies in Central and East Asian Religions* 3 (1990), pp. 1–41; Barbara Hendrischke, "The Daoist Utopia of Great Peace", in: *Oriens Extremus* 35 (1992), pp. 61–91; ead.,"The Concept of Inherited Evil in the *Taiping Jing*", in: *East Asian History* 2 (1991), pp. 1–30.

17 *Taiping jing hejiao,* 132.352.

18 Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*, Cambridge Mass. 2002.

19 Guy Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations of Late Antiquity*, Chicago 2009; id.,*The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2015.

So how are we to explain such similarities occurring at roughly the same time at either end of Eurasia, before any direct contact had emerged between the two regions?

I suspect part of the answer lies in the paired visions of history discussed above – or, rather, in the cultural and social worlds within which such visions emerged. More specifically, the enormous empires that began forming across Eurasia at the end of the first millennium BCE, culminating in the Roman and Han empires at either end of Eurasia, helped to spawn the millenarian movements that later rose against them – and that later too became embedded in them.

We have already noted the tremendous claims of a radical break that were associated with the rise of the empires. But the empires also then helped to generate new economies of knowledge that would ultimately lead to these millenarian movements.[20] More specifically, the empires created an *oikoumene* that led to the emergence of networks operating outside of and beyond local sacrificial sites. These networks created new forms of knowledge circulation, particularly through writing. In many ways, both the forms of these millenarian movements (superseding local sacrifices, turning to written scripture) and the framework of the vision (calls for greater unity, rectification, and coherence) were products of the economies of knowledge created by the empires. This is also why they took the form not of a claimed decline of the empire itself but rather of a much more general decline of the entire cosmos. This is also why they called for a radicalization of these economies of knowledge: a call for a more complete rejection of local ritual practice, a call for the following of a single, correct scripture seen as divinely revealed and without the need for human interpretation, a call for a more complete form of unity that would occur after the coming apocalypse. In other words, the millenarian claims are in many ways a radicalization of the formations of knowledge the empires had spawned.

This also helps to explain the degree to which the empires could so easily absorb the millenarian movements. The Roman empire converted to Christianity, and the Wei empire (the successor empire to the Han) largely converted to the Celestial Masters in the third century CE. The empires and the millenarian movements were directly related, just as their respective visions of history were as well.

In short, I would like to argue that thinking in terms of economies of knowledge opens up a way of explaining the complex shifts occurring over these several centuries at both ends of the Eurasia, and of explaining why such similar shifts were occurring at roughly the same time.

Such a comparative framework also raises some interesting questions. It has long been commonplace to compare the fall of the Roman empire with the fall of the Han empire. But seeing both in terms of the longer processes of late antiquity

20 Schmidt, Nora, Nora K. Schmid, and Angelika Neuwirth (eds.), *Denkraum Spätantike: Reflexionen von Antiken im Umfeld des Koran*, Wiesbaden 2016.

opens up other possibilities.[21] We should consider periodizing the Eastern Han, Wei, and Western Jin (i.e., first through fourth centuries) as one period, directly comparable to the Roman Empire over the same centuries. This allows us to see the complex dynamics over this period, instead of falling into the danger of thinking only in terms of the rise and fall of dynasties (which in this case were really successive military coups). And it allows us to trace the surprising parallels of the ways that empires and millenarian movements were interwoven through related economies of knowledge throughout this period.

4 Conclusion

Exploring economies of knowledge from a comparative perspective is helpful for several reasons.

To begin with, it hopefully helps to force a re-thinking of modernity narratives. The modernity narratives that have been so dominant in nineteenth and twentieth century Euro-American historiography have their direct parallels in other imperial periods. And they tend to be intimately related with notions of belatedness that can set in during periods of self-perceived endings (for better or for worse) of these imperial periods. Recent examples include self-proclaimed visions of "late capitalism" and "late modernity." Earlier examples include the "late antiquity" of the *Taiping Jing*. Such periods can also be located by historians in the past, as in the "late antiquity" of early twentieth century historiography. Either way, they partake of a similar framework: modernity narratives posit the current moment as a heroic break from a confining, traditional past, while lateness narratives posit the current moment as one of beckoning toward an even more radical break.

Exploring economies of knowledge from a comparative perspective, then, allows us to see when and why particular understandings of history emerge, instead of accepting such visions of history as being descriptively accurate. In terms of current assumptions, it allows is to see that the emphasis on modernity narratives reflects, at a larger level, an imperial moment, while the recent emphasis on lateness (whether to situate the current moment or to describe a moment in the past) reflects a sense of a coming end.

In the case at hand, such a comparative approach to economies of knowledge has allowed us to place late antiquity within a larger Eurasian context. Doing so may, I hope, highlight some of the key aspects of the economies of knowledge that make this period so distinctive. I have here only had room to mention a limited number of these aspects, but hopefully even these few examples help to demonstrate the potential usefulness of a comparative approach. The fact that, at roughly the same time, similar rejections of sacrifice, apocalyptic claims, turns toward the authority of a beneficent creator deity, and turns toward a revealed scripture that is purportedly understandable with minimal or no interpretation forces us to ask further questions about the nature of these economies of knowledge and what is

21 Puett, "Early China in Eurasian History", p. 103.

distinctive about them. Doing so, as I have noted, helps to highlight issues and raise questions of periodization concerning our understanding of eastern Eurasia. Hopefully bringing in the material from the eastern end of Eurasia will also help to highlight the significance of these issues in the Mediterranean region as well.

Moreover, the particular differences of the ways these debates and dynamics played out in the western and eastern ends of Eurasia also had tremendously important implications for the respective histories of the two areas, to give but one example. Although the Celestial Masters did convert many of the northern elites in the north China plain, the empire also continued its sacrifices as well. This set up a very different dynamic than occurred in the Roman and Byzantine empires following the conversion to Christianity. Here again, the significance of these differences can only be explored by placing these economies of knowledge into a comparative perspective.

In short, seeing late antiquity as a Eurasian phenomenon will hopefully allow us to explore the complex dynamics of knowledge formation during this period in ways that may shed considerable light on the histories of both ends of Eurasia.

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