

Commentary on de Pee: Epicycles of Cathay

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In “Cycles of Cathay,” Christian de Pee charts the development of Song (960–1276) historiography as practiced in the United States by placing it within the framework of a history of Sinological theory and method. The framework is insightful and provocative, and the review of historiography evinces rich, even exhaustive, reading, and skillful synthesis.

Three waves of disciplinary practice are identified. At the founding moment, European scholars, colonialists for the most part but also missionaries and others, encountered a still-living literati culture by which their own vision of the Chinese past was stamped—the vision of an unbroken self-identical imperial past. Americans from the 1930s on, by contrast, were typically trained by Chinese scholars who themselves had been educated in Japan, Europe, or the US, and took their new historiographical concerns back with them to China. These new concerns were those of a nascent social science, which sought to develop positive data about the Chinese past in service of a universalist theory that, as Robert Redfield and Milton Singer put it in 1957, would make “the great civilizations . . . more truly comparable with one another.”¹ The third, contemporary, moment is unsurprisingly marked by poststructuralism, or better put, postpositivism, and thus is witnessing what the author calls “a selective return to sinological philology” characterized by a greater “hermeneutical acuity,” and a sharper sense of the “historical resistance of the text.” Within this framework we are offered what to an outsider seems to be a very well-informed, and certainly a well-argued and well-written, review of scholarship on the Song produced by historians in the US from about the 1930s to the present.

For an Indological philologist like myself, the essay invites reflection on the concept of philology itself, in the first place, but also on comparison between China and India as sites for critical historical work, and indeed, on the past and future of China-India comparison as such.

The author never tells us in so many words what he means by “philology,” but then, it is a term before whose definition greater scholars than he or I have hesitated. In fact, one could say that the category has been as variously defined as it has because philology has for so long been a site of contestation. For de Pee, philology means something like local

1. Robert Redfield and Milton B. Singer, “Foreword,” in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), v.

knowledge, that is, the habit or practice or even theory of taking seriously emic categories and concepts, and resisting the effacement of their particularity by the lazy imposition of Western terms. Complexifying a term like *wen*, for example, which is often rendered simply as “culture,” by applying Peter Bol’s gloss “cultural forms,” “literature,” “overarching models for a unified polity patterned on the natural order”) suggests something of what de Pee’s philology aims to capture. For those of us, however, who self-identify as philologists in today’s coldly unwelcoming academy, and do so assertively in the hopes of reclaiming and reforming philology, the term means something far more profound: it is not a habit of cultural-historical sensitivity or even a theory of such sensitivity, but a whole discipline, that of making sense of texts.² Historians can of course affiliate with philologists in our effort to make sense of texts, just as philologists sometimes see themselves as historians insofar as the sense they are making of texts is, *in part*, a past sense. But if Vico and others (August Boeck, for example, and many other nineteenth-century *Sachphilologen*) may have simply subsumed history under philology, there is in fact a difference. By and large, historians, even “poststructuralist” historians, tend to view texts as documents. Indeed, they typically do not aim to see a past through texts, rather they believe they can see through texts to the past. Only once, in discussing recent work of the Song historian Stephen West (p. 66), does de Pee allow that the second approach might be wrong-headed; and indeed, the criticism (expressed by Philip C. C. Huang) that “facts are no more than representations” misses the key point that representations *are social facts*. But the “return to philology” entails far more than just the turn to culture that this new historiography represents. I want to discuss here just one aspect of this surplus.

I said that the sense philology aims to grasp is only “in part” a past sense because a critical, reflexive, hermeneutical philology understands that the sense of texts is always and inescapably also a present sense. One of the merits of de Pee’s essay, although it is a merit he could have done more to highlight, is to show how deeply the enterprise of Song historiography—here a part for the whole of the historical enterprise—has been driven by the presence of the present. Thus, the Japanese pre-war historian Naitô and his contemporaries “devised their periodizations of the East Asian past to justify the Japanese invasion of the continent (where the impetuous youth of Japan might protect the fragile subtlety of Chinese

2. Sheldon Pollock, “Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World,” in *The Fate of the Disciplines*, ed. James Chandler and Arnold Davidson. Special number, *Critical Inquiry* 35(4) (2009): 931–61. I break here, and rather shamelessly, with my reluctance to cite my own work since the Sinologists reading this comment would not be expected to know it.

culture against the alien violence of Western imperialism),”³ whereas for later US cold warriors “the Song seemed to offer repressed traditions of bourgeois liberalism and political resistance” that might redeem the “loss” of China to communism (p. 47). Indeed, as someone once said, nothing is quite so unpredictable as the past. But the core problem here is not a past problem at all, as if Japanese imperial scholarship or the now-departed area studies were uniquely deformed by some maleficent inner drive prompting scholars to create a useable past in the interests of the security state unwittingly and against their will. The core problem is the drive of one’s own historical being-in-the-world, and that is not going away.

De Pee does not tell us how contemporary historians have been able to miraculously escape their own historicity, and if they have not, what if anything they are to do about its promptings. I see no evidence in the large body of scholarship cited in the essay that the “selective return” carries with it any hint of the reflexivity (otherwise much celebrated by de Pee) that I think is essential for confronting this dilemma, the kind of reflexivity that embeds in the very historical exposition itself a recognition of the inevitability of the shaping presence of the present, and a willingness to come to terms with it, if not theoretically then at least by self-interrogation and open acknowledgement. Let me add that for any claim to true history to be sustained, we require not only the careful juggling act between positivist and hermeneutical interpretations but also a third element: the recognition of the truth—in a Rortian sense—of the *sum total of all preceding interpretations*, whether traditional or modern, whereby both the genealogy of our own interpretation is made clear and the plurality of interpretation is acknowledged. This is what I call philology in three dimensions—but that is an argument for another occasion.

While I am quoting myself I should also mention that when I say “if not theoretically” in the above paragraph I mean to register my disappointment that the return de Pee perceives has not been accompanied, to judge from the evidence of the scholarship reviewed, by any detailed theoretical account of the grounds for this transformation, and its specific, Sinological character. When we are told about “the centrality of a reflexive cultural critique in cultural history” (p. 59n91), the only relevant scholarship that can be cited relates to French (Chartier; Hunt) or German (Eley) historiography, as if some special dispensation permitted the imposition of exogenous cultural theory even while the imposition of exogenous social science is excoriated for its false and coercive universalism. But

3. De Pee does not note the prehistory of Naitô’s view of Song “early modernity” in Tokugawa-era scholarship, which might have nuanced his assessment. See Benjamin Elman, “Sinophiles and Sinophobes in Tokugawa Japan: Politics, Classicism, and Medicine During the Eighteenth Century,” *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*, 2008) (unpaginated).

in fact, this theory can often lead us hopelessly astray. Take the notion of textual instability, the *texte mobile*, that de Pee cites as paradigmatic of the European “new medievalism.” In premodern South Asia, at least, this phenomenon has more limited application, given the presence of oral traditions of such peculiar reliability that the very idea of “textual drift” and the assumption that the print revolution was required to arrest it are erroneous.⁴ I do not know whether Sinologists have yet developed a body of conceptual thinking that speaks directly to their own objects of study and the history of that study—little evidence from the detailed review of books and articles offered in “Cycles” indicates that they have done so. And if they haven’t, it would be very welcome to the rest of us if they did.

De Pee makes an interesting suggestion in linking the current “rehabilitation” of philology with the renewed appreciation of an earlier, colonial-era Sinological philology, one that is said to have been in direct contact with a living culture of the literati and thereby somehow able to avoid miscognizing the otherness of Chinese texts (a miscognition later area studies could not avoid). In this older tradition—about which more specific information, especially the *philological* values purportedly transmitted by the literati and which are now being recovered, would seem essential for his argument—de Pee wishes to see some comparability with the case of India, where indeed colonial officials were among the first to learn and make known many of the core texts of the Sanskrit tradition thanks to their interactions with traditional pandits (the work of pre-British missionaries, by contrast, was with few exceptions not published and hence was devoid of historical effectivity). But I do not think the comparison goes very far, and the differences may be instructive. What was to become the most consequential tradition of Sanskrit scholarship owes very little to the colonial moment. The holder of the first European chair in Sanskrit, Antoine Léonard de Chézy (1814, the Collège de France), was self-taught (though he did make use of the missionary J. F. du Pons’s Sanskrit grammar), and it was his pupil, Eugène Burnouf, who trained the great European scholars of the mid-nineteenth century, very few of whom ever even visited India. By contrast, the linkage between the Indian colonial and pandit traditions had almost no reverberation on the actual *translatio studii* (Charles Wilkins and William Jones, who studied with pandits and made headlines in eighteenth-century Europe, did not produce students; Friedrich von Schlegel learned some Sanskrit from an Englishman returned from India, Alexander Hamilton, who may have

4. Sheldon Pollock, “Literary Culture and Manuscript Culture in Precolonial India,” in *History of the Book and Literary Cultures*, ed. S. Eliot et al. (London: British Library, 2006), 77–94.

learned from pandits, but Schlegel's Sanskrit went nowhere.)⁵ This is not to say that study with traditional scholars was not, and, to the degree it is still possible, does not remain an important dimension of an Indologist's formation. What has been distinctive about that dimension, however, is that it is textual, not conceptual: the chance to learn to read complex texts with ethno-philological authority. The core conceptions themselves of the Indological project have always been based entirely on Western science. And in fact, for most of Indological history, the most ancient of Indic texts, the Vedas, were thought to lay altogether outside any historical Indian's claim to authority over his own texts. The greatest European scholars in the last half of the nineteenth century—the most prominent, even combative, among them being the American philologist William Dwight Whitney—believed Indian literati had preserved no authentic understanding whatsoever of their most ancient texts. Other Western Vedists (Boehtlingk, Keith, Oldenberg, Pischel, Roth, among others) may have sought to soften this position, but in fact they too felt entirely free to interpret the Vedas independently of any local traditions of exegesis and of any still-living Vedic culture—and they did. The notion that Indian philology must consist, in part, of the philology of India—not from hermeneutic charity but from hermeneutic necessity—is a development of the present.⁶

The only other points of superficial comparison with India concern, first, the issues of sources, and second (obviously related to sources), the question of the historical profession. As someone who has long grown predisposed to envy, and covet, the richness of Chinese data, I was surprised to learn—a major fact buried in a footnote—that “It is a peculiarity of Chinese historiography that no [imperial] archives survive from the period between the wooden slips of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and the seventeenth-century fragments of the imperial archives of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)” (p. 53n73). This sort of deficit is not peculiar to China, however; it marks another imperial formation contemporaneous with the Song, namely Byzantium.⁷ (And Byzantium's archival plight

5. Wilkens, translator of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (1784), studied with a Kashmiri pandit, Kāśinātha, in Benares; William Jones, translator of *Sākuntala* (1789), with the Bengalis Rāmalocana and Rādhākānta, among others (Rosane Rocher, “Weaving Knowledge: Sir William Jones and the Indian Pandits,” in *Objects of Enquiry: The Life, Contributions, and Influences of Sir William Jones*, ed. Garland Hampton Cannon et al. [New York: New York University Press, 1995], 51–82). On Schlegel, see Rosane Rocher, *Alexander Hamilton (1762–1824)* (New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1968).

6. Sheldon Pollock, “Indian Philology and India's Philology,” *Journal Asiatique* 299(1) (2011): 423–76.

7. The archival situation in Byzantium appears strikingly similar to its contemporary Song: while the “volume of written material it has bequeathed to us appears very considerable,” the fact is that the “records of the central government (and it should be remembered that the Byzantine Empire was a bureaucratic state *par excellence*), of the provincial admin-

thereby shares with the Song the interesting capacity to negate—in a way Reinhardt Koselleck would have ironically appreciated—the distinction between social and intellectual history.)⁸ More important for my comparison is the similar but far more devastating deficit that constitutes the central historiographical misery of premodern India. Except for inscriptions on stone and copper, the archives of *all* pre-Mughal Indian polities have vanished in their entirety. We have vast bodies of literary, philosophical, and religious texts, but absolutely nothing of the paratextual surround, so to call it, that the Song historian commands: the gazetteers, the court compendia, and all the rest. In India there exist, for example, no personal documents of any sort whatever until as late as the seventeenth century (consider for a moment the fact that not a single letter has been preserved from any of the thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of scholars living in Benares around 1650). It is therefore completely predictable—here my second comparison—that the Indologist should stand slackjawed in wonderment before the evidence de Pee presents of the industrial-strength output of Song historiography. For South Asian studies it is no exaggeration to say that the number of historians now working in the US in *all fields* of Indian history prior to the Mughal period (second half of the sixteenth century) can be numbered on one hand.

These issue—the transmission of study, the nature of sources, the extent of the professional historian class—are as I indicated rather superficial comparative topics. There is another, deeper question of comparativism that I want to consider in closing this brief notice. Comparative history is completely absent from de Pee's history of Song historiography in the US, presumably because it is absent from the historiography itself. This is not surprising given the disfavor into which that mode of historical inquiry has fallen in the past generation or more. A certain kind of Weberian comparative historical sociology continues to be practiced in Europe; a recent conference, for example, included Song China as one element in a postulated late-medieval "Axial Age." But aside from being unconvinced myself about this putative renaissance let alone India's participation in

istration, of the Church, of secular landlords, tenants, merchants and shopkeepers have all disappeared" (Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of the New Rome* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980], 6). Compare de Pee, 65–66.

8. De Pee, p. 58. On the impossibility of writing social history without thoughts and intellectual history without actions, Koselleck's whole oeuvre offers eloquent testimony, but see in particular "Social History and Conceptual History," in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 20–37.

it, I am not persuaded that this form of comparative history is the way to do comparison now.⁹

I earlier cited (de Pee citing) Redfield and Singer on the comparative civilizations project at the University of Chicago in the first decades after World War II. This was driven by Redfield's conviction that knowledge of what all the "great civilizations" shared might offer a bulwark against future violence: comparing civilizations meant coming to recognize a "common humanity," learning what Redfield called "a universal language." It was this pool of commonalities that would make them "truly comparable."¹⁰ Redfield and Singer were looking for social-science laws extendable across world regions—social science being an instrument not just for getting things done but for clarifying and developing "our more ultimate values"—and something of the sort is still on offer in a recent comparative history project examining the Roman and Chinese empires, which aims to isolate "'robust' processes . . . [for determining which] factors were crucial rather than incidental . . . and how different contexts could produce similar outcomes, or vice versa."¹¹

In my view this is another instance of how not to do comparative history now, and neither do China and Europe any longer constitute the important comparative pair. The great prize of twenty-first-century historical comparative scholarship lies in thinking together China and India, for which in fact—although it is an astonishing fact—we have to date virtually no useful comparative history at all. But this will not be a Redfield project, driven by the aim to test "methods likely to be applicable cross-culturally." It will not be mesmerized by method at all, certainly not by a theology of Western social science. It will neither aim to validate a hypothesis over *N* cases (the goal of comparative history) nor to develop causal accounts of big structures and processes (the goal of comparative sociology).¹² What we principally want to capture is differences rather than similarities, divergences far more than intersections—indeed, the vast set of differences and divergences that in their combination shaped the

9. See *Eurasian Transformations, Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries: Crystallizations, Divergences, Renaissances*, ed. Johann Arnason and Björn Wittrock. *Medieval Encounters*, special issue, 2004; and Leiden: Brill, 2011). My essay there is "The Transformation of Culture-Power in Indo-Europe, 1000–1300"; for the Song case, see Paul Jakov Smith, "Eurasian Transformations of the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries: The View From Song China, 960–1279," in the same collection.

10. Andrew Sartori, "Robert Redfield's Comparative Civilizations Project and the Political Imagination of Postwar America," *positions* 6(1) (1998): 33–65, 37.

11. Walter Scheidel, ed., *Rome and China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6. The Redfield quote is in "Robert Redfield," p. 35.

12. Sheldon Pollock, "Comparison without Hegemony," in *The Benefit of Broad Horizons: Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions for a Global Social Science*, ed. Hans Joas and Barbro Klein (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 185–204.

development of these two radically antipodal re-emergent powers: in the one case, for example, a strong centralized state, in the other a weak, even centrifugal one; in one case, a society that destroyed all large mammals (*The Retreat of the Elephants*), in the other, a society that learned to live intimately with them; in one case, a positivist historiographical tradition, in the other, a historiography almost indistinguishable from poetry; in one case a literary tradition without any epics whatsoever, in the other, a tradition almost completely informed by the epic imagination; in one case, a world shaped by printing, in the other, an active rejection of printing whether offered by the Tibetans or the Portuguese . . . and now, in one case, builders of hardware, in the other, writers of software.

Of course, commonalities abound, too, in statecraft, ecology, documentation, lyricism, textual culture, technology. But these are far less diagnostic for a genealogy of the present than difference. At any event, while the “Cycles of Cathay” have moved from philology to social science to a renewed “attention to textual traditions and discursive differences,” it might be good in the future for Chinese historians to consider adding an epicycle on south-south comparativism, to expand and deepen that regained sense of difference.¹³

13. Benjamin Elman of Princeton and I are in fact in the process of organizing just this sort of comparative project.