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## Where Had the Barbarians Gone?

### The Cultural Other in Early Chinese Historiography\*

There are many fascinating parallels between early development of Greek and Chinese historiography. Both traditions appeared almost simultaneously (the compilation of what is dubbed as China's earliest narrative history, the *Zuo zhuan*, might have conveniently begun in the fifth century BCE, between the life-times of Herodotus and Thucydides); both were born during the period of political fragmentation of the Greek and Chinese *oikoumenē*; and both served as an important means of perpetuating cultural unity of their respective realms. These parallels can be easily multiplied; and among them many would naturally add the depiction of the 'barbarian' Other in both traditions. In both cases, the Other appears in the earliest layers of historiographic tradition; in both, its images are utilized to buttress self-identity of the members of the 'civilized' world; and in both, the depictions may alternate between those of the 'barbarian menace' and the 'wise barbarian', the wisdom of the latter being juxtaposed with the decadence of the native political and cultural tradition.

While all these *topoi* are well-known and had been repeatedly discussed by the scholars, there is one fundamental difference, which becomes striking when one goes beyond the search for parallels and similarities. Namely, the relative weight of the 'barbarians' in Chinese historiography in general, and especially during its pre-imperial, Eastern Zhou (771-221 BCE), stage is incomparably lower than in the case of Greece. In the latter case, one may ask a question whether or not "contacts with Oriental nations and life under the Persian rulers gave an impulse to Greek historiography" (Momigliano 1978: 3). Whatever is the

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answer, it is clear that the ‘barbarians’ are exceptionally important for Greek historians. This is of course self-evident in the writings of Herodotus, the whole structure of whose *Histories* is said to be “built upon the birth, growth, and checking of the Persian Empire” (Flower 2006: 274); yet even the least ‘barbarian-oriented’ historian, Thucydides, opens his *History of the Peloponnesian War* with a brief reference to the history of Greek interactions with the external world. Few would doubt that the ‘barbarian’ issues occupied paramount position in Greek historical thought from its earliest known stages.

Now, what about China? Naturally, we encounter cultural Others in any major historical text, from the *Zuo zhuan* and the slightly later *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu*) to the masterpiece of early imperial historiography, the *Historical Records* (*Shiji*) by Sima Qian (c. 145-90 BCE). Moreover, a brief search through the *Zuo zhuan* will reveal the broad plethora of views and approaches toward the ‘barbarians’ that are evident in the Greek historiography. For some the aliens are belligerent beasts: an eminent statesman, Guan Zhong (d. 645 BCE), is cited as saying: “Rong and Di [alien tribes] are wolves and jackals who cannot be satiated” (*Zuo*, Min 1: 256). For others they are despicably inferior to the Chinese in moral and cultural terms; one statesman pejoratively refers to the Di tribesmen as “deaf, blind, obstinate and raucous”, due to their inability to master the culture of the “Central States” (China) (*Zuo*, Xi 24: 425). For some, the aliens are an easy prey, whose lands should be acquired whenever possible; for others—marginal and unwelcome participants in the affairs of Chinese polities.

The principle of the ‘barbarian inferiority’ clearly dominates the *Zuo zhuan*; but notably, the narrator and his protagonists at times present a more complex picture of the Other. Thus, a Rong tribal leader once delivers a brilliant ironic speech in which a humble self-identification of the Rong as culturally different from and supposedly inferior to the Chinese is contrasted with the speaker’s perfect mastery of Chinese culture and rhetorical skills, ridiculing thereby the Chinese cultural prejudices (*Zuo*, Xiang 14: 1005-1007). Elsewhere, another alien leader displays such an awesome wisdom and so deep understanding of Chinese culture and history that he merits an unusual praise from Confucius (551-479 BCE), the single most important Chinese thinker and the self-appointed guardian of Chinese cultural values (*Zuo*, Zhao 17: 1389). These stories do not undermine the notion of the superiority of Chinese culture, but they

buttress the ability of the ‘barbarians’ to integrate themselves fully within this culture (see more in Di Cosmo 2002; Pines 2005; Goldin, forthcoming). In slightly later texts we even encounter, albeit infrequently, a more daring departure: namely the possibility that the ‘barbarian’ culture possesses independent value and that some aspects of it should be adopted by the Chinese (Pines 2005: 75-79). The flexibility of pre-imperial views of the Other is quite remarkable, and has clear parallels in Greek tradition.

But let us put aside the variety of *topoi* related to the ‘barbarians’ in early China, and try to assess the relative importance of the Other for Chinese thinkers and history writers. It is here that the difference between Chinese and Greek traditions becomes obvious. David Schaberg rightly notices that pre-imperial Chinese historiography treats “distant and peripheral groups less as ends in themselves than as foils for central culture” (Schaberg 2001: 132). Actually, it is justifiable to assess that most Chinese historians and thinkers were not interested at all in the Other. Thus, even the *Zuo zhuan*, our major repository of early Chinese history, from which most of the examples cited above had been taken, remains largely indifferent toward the issue of Sino-alien interaction. To be sure, alien polities appear frequently on the pages of the *Zuo zhuan*; but more often than not they are depicted in almost identical terms as Chinese states and as such they remain largely indistinguishable from other members of the Zhou (Chinese) *oikoumenē*. Even the *topoi* of Chinese cultural superiority or of the aliens’ possible acculturation remain marginal for the authors: ethnic background of most protagonists is simply outside their focus of interest.

Let us illustrate this point with a single example. The *Zuo zhuan* narrates in great detail the deeds of Zifan (a.k.a. Hu Yan, fl. 650-630 BCE), one of the most important statesmen of his age, who provided crucial assistance to his nephew, Lord Wen of Jin (r. 636-628 BCE) in the latter’s unbelievable ascendancy from a position of a fugitive scion to that of the all-powerful overlord of the Zhou world. Yet only a few careful readers, who would juxtapose biographic and genealogical data in the text, would notice that Zifan was not a Chinese—he was a man of the Rong stock! He could have become the best imaginable example of the alien’s acculturation; yet this issue eschewed the attention of the *Zuo zhuan* authors (and of most of their readers), just as that of the ‘semi-barbarian’ origin of Zifan’s patron (and nephew), Lord Wen

himself. This negligence is not accidental: it evidently reflects the marginality of ethical issues to early Chinese historians and thinkers.

One may question the methodological validity of quantitative comparison of invocations of certain *topoi* in two distinct historiographic traditions; but I strongly believe that this approach has clear comparative advantages. When we compare between two immensely rich intellectual traditions, such as Greek and Chinese, it is not too difficult to discover similar ideas, concepts and views; but such similarities are at times superficial and obscure major differences. In the case under concern here, the differences between the Greek and the Chinese views of the Other are less observable in the matters of content, but are evident in the matters of relative weight of the Other in major historical and philosophical texts.

The reasons for this marked divergence between the Greek and Chinese traditions are not difficult to find. Militarily and culturally, the balance of power between the *oikoumenē* and its neighbors differed tremendously in both cases. In China, while its 'barbarian' and 'semi-barbarian' (southeastern Wu and Yue) neighbors were at times threatening, this threat remained minuscule throughout much of the Eastern Zhou period; actually, the normal situation was the expansion of Chinese "Central States" toward the 'barbarian' periphery rather than vice versa. In addition, the Zhou world enjoyed undeniable cultural hegemony over its neighbors, who tended to adopt Chinese rituals, diplomatic codes, written culture and even esthetic values; eventually, most of pre-imperial 'barbarians' became fully absorbed into the expanding 'Chinese nation'. The difference with the Greeks' encounter with the Persians could not be larger!

The 'internal' rather than 'external' focus of Chinese thinkers was further fuelled by the peculiar situation within the Chinese *oikoumenē*. Five centuries of the Eastern Zhou were the age of permanent and ever escalating warfare among Chinese states, the scope of which easily dwarfs the Peloponnesian War. Chinese statesmen and thinkers of that age were preoccupied primarily with the ways to put an end to the devastating war of all against all rather than repulsing 'barbarians'. Similarly, their common quest to unify "All-under-Heaven" was aimed primarily at restoring domestic peace and stability rather than empowering China vis-à-vis its neighbors (Pines 2000). Those who were marginally geographically and politically remained so in the intellectual realm as

well; neither historians nor philosophers paid much attention to the "barbarians of the four quarters".

This situation began changing only in the aftermath of the imperial unification of 221 BCE and the subsequent full-scale encounter between China and the pastoral nomads in its north. The new 'barbarians' proved to be formidable rivals, unconquerable and unassimilable; and their affairs became a source of major concern for imperial statesmen and thinkers (Di Cosmo 2002; Pines 2005; Goldin, forthcoming). This change is duly reflected in early imperial historiography: from Sima Qian's *Historical Records* on, major Chinese dynastic histories routinely incorporated chapters dealing exclusively with China neighbors; and Sima Qian himself may even be considered the father of 'ethnic history' in China (Di Cosmo 2010). While the 'barbarians' were still considered culturally inferior, they could no longer be viewed as a negligent political player.

The complex trajectory of Chinese empire's relations with the nomads, and its historiographical reflection cannot be addressed here; but a short observation is due. Despite the undeniable increase in the nomads' political importance, the pre-imperial notion of the aliens' marginality continued to influence historical writing. Even Sima Qian, who might have well been considered a 'barbarophile' (Di Cosmo 2002: 271), placed his accounts on alien politics at the end of his lengthy treatise, amidst accounts on different groups of remarkable, but politically insignificant people. His – and subsequent historians' – focus remained squarely within the domestic sphere: the fate of "All-under-Heaven" was to be decided within the imperial palace rather than on distant frontiers and beyond. The 'barbarians' should be given due attention either as a potential menace or as potential beneficiaries of the emperor's munificence, but they forever remained at the margins of historical texts. In the final account, the intrinsic 'inward-looking' quality of Chinese historiography inherited from its pre-imperial beginnings remained intact throughout the imperial millennia.

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