

A New Perspective on the comparative research between ancient Greece and China

Reviewed Book: Hyun Jin Kim, *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China*, London: Duckworth, 2009.

Lina CUI

School of History and Culture, Minzu University of China, Beijing, China

In Western academic circles, cross-cultural research has been improved and extended in recent years. In this area, ancient Greece and China have attracted more and more attentions. The scholars have made fruitful comparison in science, medicine, mythology and philosophy and so on. Dr. Hyun Jin Kim chooses the ethnicity as his subject in *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China* and provides a new perspective on the comparative research between ancient Greece and China.¹

This book is divided into seven parts. In the introduction, Kim analyzes the possibilities of comparing ancient Greece and China from the angle of ethnicity. He argues traditional research of ancient Greek history is limited in the Mediterranean world, which can't lead to complete understanding about it. In order to understand particular description of ancient Greeks about their peripheral regions, it will be helpful to compare their perception with that of ancient China. Like Greece, ancient China has also a wealth of literary sources that survive. For example, in Sima Qian's *Shiji*, there are many records on nomadic people, which can be compared with the contents of the *Histories* of Herodotus. Therefore, the works of these two historians constitute one of the core subjects in this book.

In the second chapter, Kim traces the making of the image of the other in Archaic Greece and China before the late Warring States respectively. The author examines the Greek literature from Homer to pre-Persian age and infers there was no systematic image of the "barbarian" before the late sixth century BC. It is the late sixth century B.C. that is a decisive epoch in the formulation of the Greek barbarian image. Its decisive impetus is the Greek interaction with the Persians. Here, Kim refuted the view of J. Hall that Hellenic ethnic consciousness was not the product of interaction with non-Greeks, but rather arising from the impulse of the Greek aristocratic elite to differentiate themselves from the lower orders.² Following that, the author analyzes the historical background of Greek invention of the barbarian and points out it is the Ionians who first felt the need to develop a clearer sense of identity to separate themselves from their would-be conquerors.³

Then, the author turns to China. He asserts that the sharp antithesis between Chinese culture and that of the barbarian also existed in early China, which was developed gradually over the centuries of interaction with non-Chinese and established finally during the second half of the Warring States period. In illuminating the formulating progress of barbarian image, the author debates the Sifang (四方) ideology of Shang dynasty. Sifang meant the ethnic groupings of four directions, while Shang was located in the centre of Sifang. In this ideology, Shang asserted their superiority over ethnic groups around it. Thus, Kim looks at it as a vague ethnic conception.⁴ Under Zhou, Sifang was developed as All Under Heaven.

¹ Hyun Jin Kim, *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China*, (London, 2009).

² Ibid., p.18.

³ Ibid., p.29.

⁴ Ibid., p.32.

Zhou integrated Sifang to become the center of world. In the Spring and Autumn period, Hua Xia was surrounded by different ethnic groups. Because of their mingling with Zhou, a radical division between the Hua Xia and non-Hua Xia had not been established at this time, but the author concludes that the interaction with these ethnic groups supplied the necessary condition for the making of ethnicity conception in the Warring States.

In the third chapter, the author explores the outward expressions and distinct features of the supremacy over the barbarian in classic Greece and Warring States China. Firstly, the author examines the influence of Near Eastern on Greece in detail. In archaic period, in face of advanced Near Eastern civilization, the Greeks imagined the origin of Near Eastern for their founding heroes, which reflected the desire to be acknowledged as a part of that civilized world. But, after Persian War, new circumstances required the Greeks adjust the image of non-Greeks to overcome their inferiority from archaic period. Since they couldn't reasonably assert their supremacy over the Near East in the realms of intelligence and material culture, they resorted to political institutions and military prowess as the particular features of the Greek-barbarian dichotomy. However, as the author rightly pointed out, these differences between Greek and barbarian were imaginary, and could hardly have convinced even the Greeks themselves.⁵

After that, Kim shifts his focus to China and begins with the introduction to the historical background of the Warring States Period. He thinks that the presence of the “Hundred Schools” made the intellectual and cultural divide between Hua Xia and the non-Hua Xia more definite and discernable.⁶ Then, the author examines the description about the barbarian in the historical literature of the Warring States and finds ritual, morality, customs, vestments, alimentary habits and language were all identified as the features distinguishing the Hua Xia from non-Chinese. Thus the author assumes that a definite antithesis between Hua Xia and the barbarian had been established in Chinese intellectual elite by the fourth or the third century B.C.⁷ In the philosophical literature such as Mencius and Xunzi, the inferiority and primitiveness of the barbarian as a whole were addressed systematically and theoretically.

Following these analysis, the author provides a conclusion to the first half of the book and summarizes the similarity and difference of the barbarian conception in Greece and Hua Xia. The author points out that the image of the barbarian in both Greece and Hua Xia were developed in the military conflict with the barbarians. However, the Greeks emphasized the blood superiority over the barbarians, while Hua Xia distinguished from non-Hua Xia mainly in education and customs.⁸

The fourth chapter concentrates on Herodotus and Sima Qian. In the first part of this chapter,

⁵ Ibid., p.56.

⁶ Ibid., p.59.

⁷ Ibid., p.64.

⁸ Ibid., pp.70-71.

Kim provides a general overview of Herodotus's views regarding the *barbaroi*. He agrees with James Romm, that is, Herodotus rarely uses the word *barbaros* or the adjective derived from it in a negative sense.⁹ For usual divide between barbarian tyranny and Greek freedom, the author argues that the barbaroi are not alone in displaying despotic tendencies. Greek tyrants portrayed by Herodotus displayed all the characteristics of a barbarian despot. Moreover, the debate of seven Persian conspirators indicated that the barbarians are not entirely incapable of a form of democracy.¹⁰ But, the author also points out that Herodotus didn't completely dismiss the conventional Greek views regarding the barbaroi. Some called it as cultural "relativism" of Herodotus. However, the author rightly claims Herodotus's relativism is not absolute relativism, but pluralistic tolerance and recognition of their validity in a strange, alien context.¹¹

As for Sima Qian, the author infers that lack of excessive schematization in the representation of barbarian peoples is also a striking feature of Sima Qian's *Shiji*.¹² The source of ideology and ethnic materials of *Shiji* is first introduced. The author argues *Shiji* was not strictly Confucian in ideology, but rather incorporated various theories. The source of its ethnographic information was mainly the *Huainanzi* (淮南子) and the *Shanhaijing* (山海经). Like Herodotus, Sima Qian could also avoid the limitations set by his cultures in representing the barbarian, but neither rejected directly the principle of distinction established by his milieu. Their similarity resulted from similar intellectual and social milieu of both historians, because they were both the subjects of cosmopolitan and multiethnic empires.

The fifth chapter compared the description of Herodotus and Sima Qian to the steppe nomads, that is, Herodotus's Scythians and Sima Qian's Xiongnu. The two historians both emphasized the difference in material culture between the civilized and nomad. But, the author proposes their methods are different. Herodotus looked inward from the fringe of the empire and favored a multi-polar view of the Eastern Mediterranean world order. Instead, Sima Qian looked outwards from the centre of Han Empire and treated the ethnic groups as the subjects of the empire. The author moves on to this difference in the sixth chapter. In this chapter, the author compares Greek attitude to Lydians and Chinese attitude to Korea and Southern Yue states. When China faced culturally similar ethnic entity, they tried to integrate them to their own political order. In contrast, when the Greeks encountered familiar Lydians, they attempted to exclude the similarity by constructing the criteria of distinction. The root of this difference lied in disparity in power and the fear of the Greeks for being absorbed to an empire.¹³

⁹ Ibid., p.75.

¹⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. A.D.Godley (Harvard University Press, 1920), 3.80.

¹¹ Ibid., p.72.

¹² Ibid., p.85.

¹³ Ibid., p.143.

In the last part, the author summarizes the whole book. Kim argues that both a Panhellenic identity and the idea of a Greek-Barbarian antithesis were inventions of the Ionians under Persian rule in the late sixth century B. C., and spread to the rest of Greece during the Ionian revolt, reflecting not confidence and contempt for the barbarian enemy, but fear and anxiety caused by the threat of imminent domination. So they made some artificial standard and stressed the difference between their culture and that of Eastern *ethne*. Nevertheless, there was no comparable sedentary civilization in Chinese orbit, so the Chinese chose to emphasize the obvious difference. Because both Herodotus and Sima Qian lived in multi-cultural world empire, they adopted pluralistic and eclectic opinion in the account of the barbarian. Herodotus divided the world not Greeks and barbarians, but the civilized and the non-civilized. Sima Qian tried to integrate the sedentary states around China by giving them Chinese ancestries. Their opinion and approach continue to influence Western and Chinese articulations of the other in modern times.

This book examines the way in which the Greeks and the Chinese formulated the image of otherness in their respective cultures and provides a broad, general overview of the development of the barbarian conception. In earlier researches about Greek identity, Greek civilization is generally treated as a unique one. The author avoids this paradigm. He puts Greece into the whole Mediterranean world and explains the development progress of the barbarian conception of the Greek from a different perspective. On this basis, the author puts forward some new arguments. For example, the making of the image of the other in ancient Greece is usually dated in the second half of 5 B.C., but the author assumes its making in the late six century B.C. Otherwise, in analyzing the case of China and Greece, the author places particular emphasis on the interaction with the barbarian and takes it as main impetus. These viewpoints are persuasive.

Nevertheless, there are also some disputable points. Firstly, As Shao-Yun Yang pointed out, the lack of materials, particularly of Ionian materials, reduces the credibility of the conclusions of this book.¹⁴ About Greek attitude toward Lydians, the records of Herodotus are not enough as evidence. Secondly, the author claims the purpose of this book is to provide the foundation for future research in this field of inquiry.¹⁵ But, his method of analyzing Greece and Chinese separately in every chapter doesn't supply more valid and accurate comparison. Finally, the main obstruct of comparative study is the lack of sufficient language skills to directly use primary sources on both sides of the comparison, which Kim himself cannot avoid. In this book, Kim uses first-hand Greek materials but little or no ancient Chinese texts. This means Kim's understandings about ancient China could be incomplete and even inaccurate. Take Sima Qian's description of Korea and Southern Yue as an example. In *Shiji*, Sima Qian provided no ethnographic descriptions of those two countries, but only described their political history. Therefore, Kim's interpretation about

¹⁴ Shao-Yun Yang, 'Review', *The Classical Review*, 1 (2011), 181-184.

¹⁵ Hyun Jin Kim, *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China*, p.3.

Sima Qian's attitude towards Korea and Southern Yue is likely to be misleading.

But anyway, this is a very illuminating publication that deserves to be read widely, particularly by those who are interested in ancient Greece and China.

REFERENCE

- [1] Herodotus, *Histories*. Trans. *Histories*. A.D.Godley. 1920. Harvard University Press.
- [2] Kim, Hyun Jin, 2009, *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China*, London: Duckworth.
- [3] Yang, Shao-Yun, 2011, Review, *The Classical Review*, 61 (1), 181-184.