

Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture, Anthony J. Barbieri-Low. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021. 316 pp. ISBN: 9780295748894.

Since 2012, the phrase “excellent traditional culture” has symbolized China’s re-embrace of its past, which after 1949 had been mostly maligned by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This past, as commonly portrayed in the narrative, is exceptional, based on China’s (alleged) 5,000 years of history, the memory of which is now extolled in Politburo study sessions. Because China was the only imperial superstate in East Asia, it is easy to accept the narrative of its uniqueness. Anthony Barbieri-Low, a Professor of Early Chinese History at the University of California at Santa Barbara, however, challenges this general narrative in a comparative project that seeks to understand the similarities (and differences) between China and ancient Egypt, another superstate that dominated its region.

State formation in archaic Egypt occurred around 3200 BCE, but not until around 1800 BCE in archaic China. Bruce Trigger, a Canadian archeologist, has previously compared this first period which, though separated by a millennium in absolute chronology, makes sense in terms of relative chronology. Barbieri-Low chooses to compare New Kingdom Egypt (c. 1548–1086 BCE) with Western Han China (202 BCE–8 CE), periods he argues are comparable given that each state enjoyed relative stability in these eras, each of which had also been preceded by eras of disunity. What are the similarities and differences between these two states?

The Egyptian “imagined community” was formed around *Kemet*, the fertile “Black Land” surrounding the Nile River. The core of traditional China was also formed by rivers, with the land between the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers coming to constitute the essence of Chinese territorial identity. The rivers, however, posed contrasting problems: “For China, the problem with the Yellow River was always *too much water*, whereas for the Nile in Egypt, the greatest problem was *not enough water*” (32). Regime legitimacy in each state was tied to the management of their respective problems. The challenge of managing the rivers was once thought to be the factor that caused state formation in Egypt and China (the famous hydraulic civilization thesis). It is now thought that river management was only undertaken at a grand scale once states had already formed. In any case, Barbieri-Low suggests that the constant threat of flooding in Chinese history contributed to a worldview obsessed with bureaucratically controlling the environment (28).

Ancient Egypt, like Early China, was an imperial state that successfully conquered its region, proclaimed a universal ideology, and administered itself through a system of scribal bureaucracy. Both states went through cycles of expansion (Egypt to Lower Nubia and the Levant; China south as far as Vietnam and north beyond the Yellow River, where the Great Wall was built) and contraction. The Pharaoh spoke of uniting the “Two Lands” (Upper and Lower Egypt); the First Emperor of Qin spoke of “combining all under Heaven” (49). Both states used *razzias*—raids of plunder rather than conquest—as tools of frontier management (50). And both states, while preferring to see themselves as unique Great Kings, were forced with time to extend the same recognition to some of their neighbors (for Egypt: Hatti, Mitanni, Babylon, and Assyria; for China: the Xiongnu). In a novel contribution to the literature, Barbieri-Low directly compares ancient diplomatic dispatches from the Xiongnu to the Han (176 BCE) and from Amenhotep III of Egypt (c. 1389–1349) to Babylonia, emphasizing parallel linguistic and cultural practices centered on the diplomacy of “brotherhood” and the reciprocal exchange of gifts (55–62). Such correspondence and reciprocity differed from that practiced in patron–client relationships, where the recognition, praise, and gifts went one way. Both ancient Egypt and early China recognized other polities as peers as a way to manage conflict and acquire needed resources (especially horses); diplomacy of this kind was an alternative to costly forays far from home that easily could cost more than they gained (82).

Of course, there were differences between the two ancient civilizations. To sketch a few, Egypt was more image and object oriented, with representative mummies and *ka* statues, while China was more textually oriented (cp. 5). China’s law code was much more extensive and intricate than Egypt’s, reaching perhaps 8 million words in the third century CE (cp. 4 and p. 116). China was at least 15x larger than Egypt in terms of population, and consequently less homogenous (214). China’s water-management efforts, centered on canals and dykes, were far more extensive than Egypt’s (228). And China had a currency, while Egypt did not. Barbieri-Low concludes that cultural and geographic factors aside, unique aspects of the Chinese state are best explained as a response “to the centuries-long interstate struggles of the Warring States period” which had created “a perfect Darwinian storm of natural selection that favored the highly centralized, efficient, and intrusive bureaucratic state that orchestrated harsh and inflexible laws, built enormous waterworks to enhance agricultural productivity, and furnished a money economy with billions of coins” (230). The early Chinese state even created “the first abstract notion of ‘the state’ in world history,” Barbieri-Low shows, standing strongly in contrast with the Pharaoh,

which imagined the Egyptian state as being the “house” of its king (231). In contrast, the First Emperor of Qin ordered that documents use the term “the government” rather than the royal or ducal house, creating a distinction between regime and state. Such depersonalized government, Barbieri-Low reminds his readers, did not emerge widely in the West until the eighteenth century.

Far too much history is written with an ideographic lens, looking at one state or people in isolation from others. It is only the nomothetic lens that allows us to discern difference and novelty. Barbieri-Low has risen to the challenge, producing a first-rate comparison of two great ancient states that hopefully will inspire similar approaches. The Qin emperor may have invented the abstract state, and it is true in terms of scale China is oft in a category of one; but in many other ways—including river management, universal ideologies, foreign conquests and assimilations, regime legitimacy, Great King diplomacy, and bureaucratic scribal cultures—China was one empire among many.

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