Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident: reflections on twenty years of comparative scholarship

By Lisa Raphals

Founded in 1982 under the editorship of François Jullien, Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident began with the explicit goal of opening Sinology to the human sciences and making it more widely available. This approach parallels an analogous development in classics which, as a field, was revolutionized by the introduction of structuralist and other anthropological perspectives in the 1960s and 1970s by Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne, Pierre Vidal-Naquet and others.

For its first ten years, the journal covered mainly literary and historical topics, focusing on problems that bore on modern China involving complex interactions with pre-modern Chinese culture. The issues were thematic, but as Jullien pointed out (1984), a single issue can do no more than open a door for investigation. This is especially true because the objects of Sinological reflection are not pre-constituted.

Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident underwent a shift ten years later. Under the editorship of Karine Chemla and François Martin, its perspective became explicitly comparative. Many of the comparative essays are by Sir Geoffrey Lloyd, who has contributed to almost every issue since. Readers familiar with his recent studies of Greek and Chinese science will find much of their groundwork in these pages. Issues were often individually edited. To illustrate the depth and variety, I will discuss three in detail.

From numbers, the world

Issue 7. 1985. Understanding the world: materials for the cultural history of number in ancient China, present, and future, only emerged in the early fourth century, after the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian war. Lloyd attempts to ‘use the example of example’ to demonstrate some of the pitfalls and value of comparative study in general. He links epistemological attitudes and social practices, arguing, for example, that suspicion of the authority of example went hand in hand with suspicion of authority in general. He also shows the complex use of example in mathematical proof, and compares Greek and Chinese methods of managing examples in mathematical reasoning.

Divination and rationality in ancient China

Divination and rationality in Chinese antiquity (22) was an eponymous successor to Jean-Pierre Vernant’s Divination et Rationalité (1974), which addressed the rationality and coherence of divination and its significance in the formation of social institutions. Vernant showed how the symbolic operations of diviners imposed their rationality and legitimacy on the intellectual and social fabric of the societies in which they operated. This issue explicitly pursues Vernant’s original agenda in the context of ancient China, and shows how divination affected the development of medicine, law, philosophy, politics, and the history of science. Redouane Djamouri reviews Shang bone and tortoise divination and argues that divination and writing were distinct practices that involved different kinds of artifacts and different types of rationality. Marc Kalinowski analyses the elements of predictive style in the structure of Zhuangzi oracular rhetoric. He argues that predictions had consistent structures and performed significant narrative functions throughout the text within a sequence of circumstance, prediction, argument, and verification. These cycles were used to render ethical judgments and to oppose the predictive wisdom of the text’s authors to the failings of its narrative subjects.

Jean Levi explores the hermeneutic continuities between Warring States divinatory practice, empirical conjecture and rationalist critique. John Hendersen explores the commonalities and differences of the esegesis of the Confucian classics (especially the Yi and Chuang) and the divinatory arts. Some of the Confucian classics had divinatory origins, and divination itself was considered a form of exegesis, with similar assumptions and functions to the exegesis of texts. Donald Harper explores the complex milieu of physicians, diviners, astronomers, and jingjishi specialists. He uses the Hsienngai shi and excavated texts from Bannan and Shihkouh to show the evolution of iatromantic thought from a primarily esoteric medical tradition to modern cosmological and mechanistic methods of hermeneutical diagnosis. He shows that iatromancy was an important vehicle for the introduction of modern iatromancy into medicine. Physicians imitated the rhetoric of diviners in their diagnoses, and drew on astrological, calendrical, and hermeneutical systems for their theory. Marc Caizkrentmihahy compares the interpretative practices of diviners and of the Qin legal codes, using debates about technical procedures and their results in both areas, while Jérôme Bourgon examines the role of divinatory schemes in the codification of Chinese law, showing how exegesis by the School of Mysteri- ies informed legal codification dur- ing and after the Tang Dynasty. Jean-Jacques Glassner prepares the ground for a comparative approach to Chinese and Mesopotamian divination by considering the comparative contexts for the development of writing, the role of rulers and exorcists, and the relation of divination to modes of rationality and to the writing of history. G.E.R. Lloyd concludes by comparing the roles of Chinese and Greek divination in the development of self-conscious reflection and methods of scientific inquiry.

This brief examination shows how Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident has pioneered and maintained a felicitous approach to the problem of reconciling approaches that nowadays seem hopeless- ly at war. Individual contributions deal with specific texts and cultural par- ticularities, but under an agenda that is self-consciously and deliberately comparative. In this way the journal has steered a course between the Scylla of cultural and historical particularism and the Charybdis of essentializing general- ization and comparison. It merits study and emulation.

* Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident: cahiers de recherche comparatifs, eds. Karine Chemla and François Martin, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, Université de Paris VIII.

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