Towards a Comparative Understanding of Rulership: Discourses, Practices, Patterns

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The preceding chapters have focused on connections between centres and peripheries, rulers and populations. Notwithstanding the routines of government-by-paper, particularly developed in China, these connections necessarily also took shape in two characteristic forms: agents representing the ruler and direct interactions between rulers and their populations.

High-profile trouble-shooters personally representing the ruler operated in distant territories or carried special responsibilities for solving crises; routine administrators administered core lands, where standard patterns of governance prevailed. Agents could rise through steady and competent loyal service or be catapulted into power because of their lineage and the ruler’s favour. The career patterns systematically examined by Kent Guy for Qing China show an established practice of bureaucratic evaluation; in addition Guy underlines the impact of local connections and recommendations as well as the personal involvement of the ruler and his advisors. Metin Kunt’s discussion of the Ottoman case suggests that the balance among these factors could shift dramatically, with central leadership’s choices indirectly causing devolution and the rise of local elites. In Europe, a similar mixture of rulers’ personal initiatives, administrative procedure, and localised responses determined the changing patterns of centre and periphery—only in the course of the seventeenth century, however, did the standards of administrative procedure in Europe approach those of Imperial China. Moreover, the persistence of nobilities in the upper layers of executive office in Europe and the marked presence of semi-hereditary high office in some countries set the European experience apart from most Asian examples.1

Dynastic power can be examined effectively only with combined political and cultural perspectives—it is difficult to draw a line between these overlapping domains. The cultural clichés of rule, didactically presented in discourses opposing good and bad examples of rulership or in moral codices outlining the ideal ruler, set standards for rulers and permeate the literary legacy of the court. This normative worldview also affected the representation of rulership to wider audiences, in interactive practices such as sacrifices, ceremonies, processes, and tours but also in buildings, printed media, or visual arts. The ideals of rulership, reflected in numerous tracts across the Eurasian continent, clearly show similarities as well as marked differences. There is some consensus on the key responsibility of rulership, protecting harmony and shielding the weak against the predations of the mighty, inherent in the mandate of heaven, in the Islamicate idea of sultanic power protecting the vulnerable against the wrongdoings of the powerful (zulm), or in the European notion of the prince as guardian of the bonum publicum and religious concord. This compelling idea, rarely a neat match with the actual behaviour of rulers, did underline the importance of access and petitioning or at least some form of an ‘ombudsman’-system that allowed the populace to voice its grievances. This shared ideal structured as well as restricted the forms of princely representation. Chinese literati, Patricia Ebrey points out, were keen to remind the emperor of his heavy ritual and moral responsibilities, censuring overly spendthrift, martial, or peripatetic lifestyles. While similar attitudes can be found among religious advisors around kings and sultans, most ‘princely mirrors’ leave far more room for generous display as well as for military leadership. Rulers are universally
