CHAPTER 8

Prince, Pen, and Sword: Eurasian Perspectives

Jeroen Duindam

1 Global History

This book on the relationship between rulers and elites in Eurasian polities started out as an attempt to bridge the gap between two contradictory but equally valid impulses. All history is regional history: scholars need languages and contexts to make sense of the past. At the same time, regional compartmentalization turns history into a dead-end street: only more comprehensive views can show the specificity of regions as well as their multiple connections. The authors were trained as regional specialists, and have worked with primary sources in the languages and scripts connected to their areas of expertise. Yet at the same time, they noticed the limitations of the area perspective, and subscribe, in one way or another, to the current challenge to move towards a more global understanding of history.

We share these conflicting loyalties with many other scholars, and over the last four decades several paradigms took shape to deal with the challenge of combining specialized research with the global horizon. The introduction considered some of these paradigms and outlined our preliminary choices. Comparison, whether regional or global, defines themes and questions that are equally relevant in different settings and examines the variety in outcomes with the intention to make sense of divergences. It takes diversity for granted but looks for patterns in human behaviour. One of the main challenges facing comparative historians is to define questions that do not accept as standard the specific experiences of one region or period; this problem is relevant for all historians, but it becomes painfully explicit in the case of comparatists. Secondly, it is particularly difficult for comparative historians to acquire an equal basis of knowledge and materials for all areas they include: extension of scope will necessarily reduce depth of the comparison. There is a third complication: the availability and the nature of source materials vary greatly from region to region. The problem, therefore, is more fundamental than the researchers’ ability to master languages or find enough time to read materials. With a specific theme and carefully crafted set of questions, however, global comparison can be a powerful intellectual tool and a necessary safeguard against cultural parochialism.
We deal in different ways with these challenges. Jeroen Duindam’s chapter on the court explicitly combines Eurasian and global levels of comparison. The critical assessment of some more widely accepted Eurasian divergences and the subsequent elaboration of several globally shared functions move his comparison beyond the level of describing ‘differences and similarities’. Peter Rietbergen, Maaike van Berkel, and Richard van Leeuwen stay within the bounds of Eurasia, considering each of the three macro-regions with equal attention. Jos Gommans’s interpretation of the Central Eurasian warband moves closer to connected history: he concentrates on the Inner Asian core lands and traces the emulations of the Chinggisid warband in contiguous post-nomadic empires. Liesbeth Geevers and Marie Favereau deal with the Habsburgs and Jochids respectively in their jointly written comparative chapter. All chapters approach political questions with a cultural perspective akin to the priorities of connected history and zoom in on the perceptions of contemporaries. Two contributors, in particular, focus on literary sources that can be found in all regions discussed: Richard van Leeuwen on fiction and Maaike van Berkel on advice literature. Their comparison raises a question relevant for all chapters—and to some extent for all historical scholarship: the ambiguous relationship between the representations written by contemporaries and the social realities of the worlds they lived in, as far as we can hope to reconstruct these on the basis of various sources. Comparison, we argue, needs to take into account both levels as well as their at times puzzling interaction.

The connected perspective has corrected narrow views of European expansion as a one-way process; it has also counteracted the tendency to compartmentalise the globe in rigid cultural zones. Within each of the macro-regions defined as the basis of our project, a lingua franca and a shared moral-religious background facilitated understanding. Between contiguous regions long traditions of contact eased communication. West Asia and Europe shared legacies and examples, and the same can be said to some extent about the contiguous zones of Central and East Asia. The repeated movement of Central Asian peoples in all directions, too, created a basis for further contact. Europeans moving to East Asia, however, relied on a relatively thin stream of previous information, and contacts here left even more room for protracted misunderstandings as well as for manipulation by intermediaries than the contact between Europe and West Asia.¹ The overarching view of the comparatist or the generalist needs

¹ This was one of the conclusions of a conference organized by Christian Windler and Henrietta Harrison at the University of Bern (2–4 June 2016): ‘Transformations of Intercultural Diplomacies: Comparative Views on Asia and Europe (1700 to 1850)’. The presence of drago-