
Essay cluster: Grounds for a trans-regional medieval studies, beyond the global

Spacetime, connectivity, multipolarity, juxtaposition

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Abstract The term ‘global Middle Ages’ has been critiqued for potentially having the effect of fitting the world into a historiographical category invented by and primarily applying to Europe, especially Western Europe. With the aim of circumventing the ideological underpinnings of ‘global’ and ‘medieval,’ inventing new meanings for old markers of temporality, and exploring methodological frameworks for establishing a comparative outlook, this essay considers three aspects in reconceptualizing medieval studies: the notion of spacetime for thinking of periodization in world histories and cultures; a focus on multipolarity, individual agency, and cultural hybridity in studying trans-regional connectivity; and a model of juxtaposition that goes beyond comparative literature.

摘要 近年來，“環球中世紀”這一詞語受到批評，因為它有可能把世界歷史納入一個主要應用于歐洲特別是西歐的歷史敘事之中。本文對“中世紀研究”做出重新思考，目的在於避開“環球”和“中古”的意識形態內涵，為舊有的時間標志重新發明新意義，同時也在方法論層面探索新的比較框架。討論主要從三方面進行：一，以物理學中的“時空”概念來思考世界歷史分期；二，在研究跨地域連結時，聚焦于多極化、個人能動力以及文化混雜性；三，採取與以往的比較文學有所區別的并置模式考察世界文化的異同。

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As a scholar of medieval or ‘Middle Period’ Chinese literature with training in English and comparative literature, I have been observing the growth of the relatively recent field of the global Middle Ages with great interest. Despite the unease with terms such as ‘medieval’ and ‘global’ because of their teleological implications, I find the intent to go beyond Europe and primarily Western Europe in medieval studies commendable and productive for moving our scholarly work forward. These terms, which are not going away any time soon, can also turn out to be useful; the challenge is to circumvent their ideological underpinnings that validate the narrative of modernity. In what follows I suggest three conceptions to help meet the challenge, invent new meanings for old markers of temporality, and keep in sight our goal of establishing conversation across geographic distance and difference.

Spacetime: Multiple medievalities

Forms of periodization are often necessary when we consider history in general and literary history in particular, as they are helpful for thinking about larger social and cultural shifts. For a long time, Chinese literary history has used a dynastic reign as the only model, and this remains the primary form of periodization in both native and overseas scholarship on pre-twentieth-century Chinese literature. To some extent this is adopted by scholars of modern Chinese literature as well, as seen in studies of the literature of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) adopting 1949 as the starting point of critical inquiry. This model has proven woefully inadequate for conceiving of literary continuities and changes that happened independently of political sovereignty. In recent years, many scholars in my field opt for the term ‘Middle Period’ to avoid conflation with the European ‘Middle Ages,’ although the underlying assumption of the ‘ancient-middle-modern’ frame is clearly still at work.

I am not convinced that it is better to adopt ‘Middle Period’ over ‘medieval,’ because it would seem to deny the agility of the term ‘medieval’ and concede that it is an essentially and exclusively European historiographical category. To appropriate ‘medieval’ affords the opportunity to free it conceptually from its purely historical ground and make it useful for comparative study. In this way we would indeed ‘resuscitate “medieval” as a theoretical term divorced from teleology and the spectre of an inevitable modernity’ (Davis and Puett 2016, 11). One way to do so is to acknowledge and accept the great regional diversity in periodization, both within one cultural condition, as scholars often disagree about the



beginning and ending of a ‘middle period,’ and across cultures, as each culture has its own temporal zones.

Take Japan as an example: the medieval period of Japan is often considered to last from around 1200 to 1600. It has a small window of overlapping with the European Middle Ages, but the term ‘medieval’ or *chūsei* is largely used with reference to Japan’s own historical development, marked by the decline of imperial power as well as the rise of the shogun military rulers and the samurai class. China’s medieval period is generally identified as beginning in the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), with many scholars equating the end of Chinese antiquity with the fall of the Han empire. This makes sense, not necessarily in terms of political order, but because of the two momentous events that took place in this period, namely the widespread use of paper and the import of Buddhism. Paper technology brought about a revolution in textual transmission and knowledge dissemination, and the translation of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Chinese introduced new ideas, beliefs, images, and vocabulary. Culturally, linguistically, and literarily, the first through third century certainly constitutes a watershed moment. The other end of the Chinese medieval period, however, has been variously located in the ninth century, the fourteenth century, or the sixteenth century. The Third Middle Period China Humanities Conference, hosted by Yale University in the summer of 2023 and entitled ‘Stuck in the Middle,’ issued a call for papers ‘from all disciplines in the humanities ... that deal with China between 220–1600.’ Yet, the first and second of the Middle Period China conferences, held at Harvard University in 2014 and then at Leiden University in 2017, had respectively set the temporal limits at 800–1400 and from the eighth through sixteenth century. In the last two temporal schemes, the decades around 800 are clearly regarded as a turning point, and for good reasons as well: it is the consensus of many scholars that this period witnessed the emergence of new ways of conceptualizing the world as well as the first flourishing of print culture. Still, whether the 800s should be defined as the beginning of the Middle Period, the ‘mid-point’ of an elongated Chinese medieval period, or ‘the end of Chinese “Middle Ages”’ (Owen 1996), might itself be a good conversation starter.

In thinking of periodization in world history, I find *spacetime*, drawn from the science of physics, a useful concept. Spacetime is a mathematical model that combines the dimensions of space and time; it enables us to understand relativistic effects rather than believing that the measurements of time and space remain the same for everyone. I borrow the word to refer to the fact that multiple temporalities exist in different places of the world and also within one culture for different observers¹. There is no fundamentally right or wrong observation about

¹ This matches well with Geraldine Heng’s point about modernities-within-premodernity (Heng 2014, 237; 2015, 362–63). I thank one of the anonymous readers for alerting me to Heng’s insightful and immensely resonant essays.

periodization, since we all must start from where we are, and the multiplicity of perspectives and voices is the best thing for dialogues that propel our work forward. When being defined in context, the term ‘medieval’ becomes sustainable due to its newly acquired elasticity and suppleness. What this means is that we not only look at what was going on in different parts of the world in any given period, as Davis and Puett suggest (2016, 6), but also think about certain issues that different cultures in their own ‘middle ages’ had in common despite temporal disparity—such as the impact of paper technology on a literary culture, or the function of court and literary salons in a cultural tradition. Such comparative study will expand our outlook and enrich our curricula, a point to which I return below.

In many ways, the time differences of our world provide a good analogy for this spacetime diversity, just as the imposition of a single time—‘Beijing Time’—upon the entire PRC across its vast territories could be seen as an undesirable example of enforced uniformity. While the continued use of ‘medieval’ might seem to reaffirm a tripartite structure of time, such a term is currently so embedded in academic discourse that getting rid of it would not only prove impractical, but also risk losing a common ground on which many scholars could talk to one another across fields and disciplines. Far better, in my opinion, is to continue to work from within terms like ‘medieval,’ and in the course of time complicate these terms enough that there will be more and more historically nuanced work, based on an acute awareness of a much larger context for the geolocation of the immediate target of scholarly inquiry. If, for instance, we acknowledge the existence of multiple ‘modernities’ in ‘premodern’ times, that in itself already loosens up the rigid linearity of the story of ‘modernity’ and pushes us to contemplate these artificial divisions of time.

Some scholars may object that such a tripartite structure of time excludes cultures for which that structure does not work. I do not doubt this to be true—as a matter of fact, one may very well question if, and *how*, such a structure indeed works or does not work for China, or India, for that matter. One may also wonder, however, if any theoretical model claiming universality could ever exist without blunting a truly refined understanding of a culture. After all, if we respect and embrace differences, then we would naturally accept that one size does not fit all, and that disparity and contrast have just as much value as similarity and resonance in understanding human history.



Connectivity: Multipolarity, individual agency, and hybridity

Rather than societies insulated from one another by geographic distance, the medieval world was inter-connected by commerce and pilgrimage across lands and oceans. Through written records and archeological evidence, the exchange of things, persons, and ideas has been well explored by scholars. This is a worthy enterprise because, taken as a whole, these explorations serve to dispel the misperception that the age of discovery only began with European voyages in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, an erroneous assumption upholding ‘the Europe- and North American-centred model defined primarily by the end point of globalization, namely the triumph of the West in the modern era’ (Holmes and Standen 2018, 8).

Some scholars worry that the study of medieval networking may be treated as a pre-story justifying the past five centuries of western exploitation and colonialism (Sassen 2006; Davis and Altschul 2009). This is a valid concern, but when one looks at historical specificities, one would notice profound differences between the medieval and modern worlds that in fact run counter to a superficial continuity in their cultural crossings. Scholars like Wang Yong, Glen Dudbridge, and others have emphasized the importance of looking beyond trade in goods and of giving attention to the exchange of books and ideas in examining medieval networking (Wang 2003; Dudbridge 2018; Tao and Fujita 2021). On the one hand, numerous Buddhist scriptures were translated from Sanskrit into Chinese from the second through seventh century and beyond; these brought about a transformation of Chinese society, impacting thought, literature, and visual culture (Tian 2011, 1–67). On the other hand, Chinese written culture, carried out by diplomats and Buddhist monks, exerted tremendous influence in Japan and Korea (Wiebke, Li, and Tian 2017, 510–67). These cultural entanglements provide a healthy counterbalance to the overwhelming historiographic interest in surplus, accumulation, production, exploitation, capital, labor, and hegemony, a focus that takes ‘the perceived essence of history’ to be wealth and power (Dudbridge 2018, 298). They present, one might add, a drastically different character than the primarily economic process of interaction and integration that is globalization.

With regard to the unique nature of medieval networking in contrast with modern global network of trade, services, and capital, I wish to highlight two features. First, the *multipolarity* of the medieval period: this was a time when the world had multiple centres and, more important, shifting perception of centres, marked by cultural pluralism and religious

syncretism. Second, the *small scale and fragmentation* of trade, religious journeys, and diplomatic missions: unlike the mega-corporations and government-propelled economic interactions among modern nation-states, medieval networking was more diffused and modest, often carried out by relatively small groups and individuals.

We might turn our gaze briefly to the late fourth century. A Chinese Buddhist monk, Faxian (ca. 340–422), decided to journey to India to seek Buddhist texts. Going by the land route, he departed from Chang'an (modern Xi'an), the capital of the northern regime of the Later Qin dynasty (384–417) ruled by the Qiang people. He was joined by ten companions and then spent thirteen years traveling through nearly thirty kingdoms in Central, South, and Southeast Asia. When he finally returned to China in 412, he was the only one left from the group who went with him. He came back via the sea route from Sri Lanka, 'the kingdom of lions,' and landed in the territory controlled by the southern Jin regime (317–420). He was subsequently taken to the capital city of the southern dynasties, Jiankang (modern Nanjing), where he became a sensational figure and, in response to the request of an eager audience, wrote down his experience in an account known as *A Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms* (see Tian 2011, 88–118). This is the earliest extant Chinese first-person account about travels to foreign lands, predating by more than two hundred years the monk Xuanzang's (ca. 602–664) more famous account of his journey to India.

In his account, Faxian as a devout Buddhist constantly refers to India, the Buddha's birthplace, as *Zhongguo* ('the Middle Kingdom'), the very name that China itself was and is known by, and designates the Chinese realm as the borderland (*biandi*). In fact, one of Faxian's fellow travellers chose to stay on in Central India and vowed never to be reborn in the borderland again (Tian 2011, 97–99). Faxian himself was motivated to return only after he chanced to see a white silk fan, imported from 'the land of Jin [the regime in south China],' as an offering to Buddha in a temple in Sri Lanka: at that moment, he was overwhelmed by nostalgia and decided to go home (Li 2002, 204; Tian 2018). He was able to get on a merchant ship with more than two hundred people aboard, but the ship was blown off course and arrived at Yavadvipa or the island of Java. After a five-month sojourn there, Faxian managed to embark on another merchant ship bound for Guangzhou, again with more than two hundred people aboard, only to find himself landing on the Shandong Peninsula, more than a thousand miles north of where they were heading.

Several observations can be made. One is about the multiplicity of centres and peripheries in the medieval world, which were *not* always defined politically or economically. Another is that spiritual expeditions were indeed as important as mercantile missions: the network of trade



played an important role in facilitating Faxian's homebound journey, but he had set out on what was first and foremost a book quest, motivated by religious faith. A third observation is how one individual's aspiration and determination were instrumental in this epic journey fraught with difficulties and dangers, undertaken by a man who, at the moment of setting out, was already at an advanced age by contemporary standards. And yet, a single person, pursuing and bequeathing written texts, left some large footprints in history. A fourth observation is that Faxian was by no means unusual in his time, since there were many others like him, including women, especially Buddhist nuns, originating from China, India, Korea, and Central and Southeast Asian states (see Sen 2003; Tian 2011, 13–18; Dudbridge 2018, 302–309). Their travels, far from the predatory, oppressive networks built in the fifteenth century and beyond by 'closed societies' championing their own religious orthodoxy (Shepard 2018, 149–155), were smaller, looser, more scattered, and more individually oriented.

Not only did merchandise, technology, and skills move, but ideas and stories moved around as well, and the small-scale, fragmented, diffused mobility of medieval people was conducive to the agility of these intangible travellers across political, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries. When ideas and stories moved, they became so mixed and so transformed that it is sometimes difficult to discern their origin. The "Chinese" Cinderella story,' recounted by a slave of Zhuang ethnicity from the southern borderland of the Tang empire and documented by a Han Chinese elite man around 850 CE, seven hundred years before its emergence in any European record, points to the South Asian and Southeast Asian connections of the tale, along routes 'well-travelled by traders, armies, bureaucrats, poets, and monks' (Beauchamp 2010, 484). Instead of looking for origins and equating origins with authenticity, we will do well to embrace a model of cultural circulation and hybridity, which is one of the most effective ways of countering the oppressive closed-mindedness and insularity of nationalism.

Juxtaposition

In the final section I propose a methodology of juxtaposition, by which I mean that we place two or preferably three phenomena, usually studied in isolation, side by side, and see what such juxtaposition could yield. This is a very different model from that of networking, for there may not have been any direct contact between those cultures or societies, nor even an exact temporal overlap. Why should we do this? Because by looking at historical and cultural phenomena across the cultures and societies of the world that bear fundamental similarities—the common ground for a

comparative study—yet present different trajectories of development, we gain valuable perspective on the primary objects of our study, and we become aware of a larger picture, within whose framework we can acquire a better understanding of both the uniqueness of a given culture and the commonality underlying cultures and societies. This, in turn, is an important part of our mission as educators. As Samer M. Ali put it, ‘The formation of cognitive maturity, and thus sociability, depends on one’s *trained* capacity to see one’s reality as a single perception among a valid plurality. The study of other cultures thus opens the possibility for individuals to see beyond the centrality of their own lives, an essential rite of passage in becoming a mature and fair human’ (Ali 2010, 2; emphasis mine). For this purpose, it is of paramount importance not only to include world arts and literatures in our curricula, but also to incorporate a comparative outlook in our own work. To opt for juxtaposing three, rather than two, phenomena can help us move beyond the older binary model that opposes presence and absence, or possession and lack, in comparative studies.

Many topics and issues have a resonance across medieval cultures—for instance, textual production and transmission, book making and book collecting, the materiality of writing and its impact on a literary culture. Paper, one of the most important ‘game changers’ during a literary renaissance in China at the turn of the third century, was introduced from China into Baghdad via Central Asia in the late eighth century and played a key role in the growth and development of Arabic books (Bloom 2001, 32–45; Gruendler 2020, 5–12). As Beatrice Gruendler observes, ‘Too often, media histories are conceived from a European perspective, or begin with the printing press as the first media revolution’ (Gruendler 2020, 168). An examination of the incredibly important role played by books in East Asian and Near Eastern traditions, especially in the age of manuscript culture, can offer us a more wide-ranging and nuanced understanding on the book cultures of the premodern world.

Consider court culture as another example. The court was the centre of literary and cultural production in early medieval China, when royal patronage played a crucial part in cultural life, and court literature served as an inspiration and a model for what was going on in the provinces. There is much to explore and uncover in comparison with other cultures in terms of representation of kingship, public composition of poetry in the court setting, literary salons, poets and patrons, feasting and banqueting, and gift-giving and receiving in well-crafted letters and poems. How was literature produced in a medieval Chinese, Islamic, and English court? How did the patron-protégé-production triangle work in these contexts? What did they have in common, and what were their differences—and what can we learn from that?



In these cases, there need not be any actual contact to speak of, and the historical characters may not even have lived at the same time; nonetheless, the realities and circumstances they inhabited and their responses to them were often strikingly analogous, and when one looks at them together, there is always a mutual illumination. Scholars observing them in such juxtaposition vastly expand their horizons. While juxtaposition involves comparison, it is more of an outlook, a knowing, and an awareness than of any formal comparative study. In other words, it is not necessarily something that always needs to be, or even could be, worked into an article or a book. And yet, the knowledge of parallels and analogies deepens and enriches scholarship. One could say that the outlook of juxtaposition is closer to that of world literature, the most recent iteration of comparative literature as the latter became ‘globalized,’ than it is to the standpoint of traditional comparative literature, whose original intention was all good and well, but which never entirely succeeded in breaking out from ‘the West,’ largely Western Europe. Along these lines, it would also be helpful to produce edited volumes, journal issues, panels, workshops, and symposia where we juxtapose medievalists from different traditions who are nevertheless interested in common topics and issues. In our institutions, it would be of enormous value to develop a curriculum that allows students to understand world cultures and histories *in a connected and coherent way*. Just like the study of connections and networks of people and places, this would require the collaboration of regional experts who can read primary sources in different languages with facility.

In the early 380s, a woman named Egeria wrote about her pilgrimage to the Holy Land in what Mary Campbell describes as ‘the first narrative of travel produced by the Christian, European, Western world we still live in’ (Campbell 1988, 21). It was about twenty years before Faxian embarked on his book quest through South and Southeast Asia. Then, in 921, almost exactly five centuries after Faxian’s death, Ibn Fadlan, an Arab, was sent from Baghdad by the Abbasid caliph on a mission to the Muslim ruler of the Bulghārs, and he subsequently gave an account of his journey, including a detailed report of his encounter with a party of Viking traders on the upper reaches of the Volga River. It is the earliest Arabic travelogue recording the encounters between northern Europe and the Muslim world, written at a time when ‘there was no established genre of travel writing in Arabic’ for Ibn Fadlan to follow as a model (Lunde and Stone 2012, xxv). All three travel accounts are remarkable, each in its own way. Although these authors—one woman and two men—spoke different languages, moved about in different spaces, and travelled for different purposes, placing them alongside one another sheds light on the particular nature of

each journey and on each author's narrative style and rhetorical choices, and it encourages us to think beyond national borders.

Can we salvage the 'global medieval'? I believe we indeed can. The first step is to become aware of the implications of the term. There are surely more ways than one to conceptually free 'medieval' from its pure historical ground and make it useful for comparative study. In this essay I borrow the concept of spacetime to conceive regionally diverse medieval temporalities that nevertheless share similar issues and concerns across cultures. Another important aspect to consider is how we may think of medieval connections beyond trade and commerce, and look to the small-scale, fragmented, and free-ranging side of medieval mobility at least as much as its large-scale, organized, and oppressive side. Finally, apart from examining connections and networks, I propose a model of juxtaposition for our own reading, research, and teaching. This model requires us to extend our reach and cultivate creative collaboration among regional experts, and as a result it expands our intellectual horizons beyond linguistic, cultural, and national borders.

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