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**Rethinking historical comparisons  
- global history and the narrative of  
Chinese failure**

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A notable trend in historiography in the new millennium has been the emergence of the subfield of global history – a wide and occasionally disparate yet resilient movement committed to a conceptualisation of the historical world and historical processes as fundamentally interconnected and global, challenging conventional, Eurocentric historiographies. This paper examines the effect of two influential works of global history – *The Great Divergence* (2000) by Kenneth Pomeranz and *On Their Own Terms* (2005) by Benjamin Elman – on a conventional historical narrative of Chinese failure and European triumph in the early modern period. These evidently very different works of historical research are analysed to uncover some of the core ideas shared by most authors working on global history, and the challenge to historical comparisons they entail. This case study is then used to reflect more widely on the weaknesses of conventional forms of comparative history, and on the particular benefits and advancements that the global history family of approaches may bring to the field if used properly.

Keywords: Comparative History, Global History, China, Kenneth Pomeranz and Benjamin Elman.

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### Repensar comparações históricas - história global e a narrativa do fracasso chinês

Uma tendência importante no novo milênio tem sido a emergência do subcampo da história global – um movimento amplo e por vezes contrastante mas ainda assim resiliente, comprometido com uma conceitualização do mundo histórico e dos processos históricos como fundamentalmente interligados e globais, desafiando as historiografias convencionais, eurocêntricas. Este artigo examina o efeito de dois influentes trabalhos de história global – *The Great Divergence* (2000) de Kenneth Pomeranz e *On Their Own Terms* (2005) de Benjamin Elman – sobre uma narrativa histórica convencional do fracasso chinês e do triunfo europeu na Idade Moderna. Estas obras historiográficas, evidentemente muito diferentes, serão analisadas para revelar algumas das ideias centrais partilhadas pela maioria dos autores que trabalham sobre história global, e o desafio de fazer comparações históricas que estas envolvem. Este estudo de caso será então usado para refletir de uma forma mais ampla sobre as fraquezas das formas convencionais da história comparada, e sobre os benefícios e avanços particulares que as abordagens da história global podem trazer para o campo, se usadas da forma certa. Palavras-chave: História Comparada, História Global, China, Kenneth Pomeranz e Benjamin Elman.

# Rethinking historical comparisons - global history and the narrative of Chinese failure

Mikko Toivanen\*

## INTRODUCTION

Comparative history has a long pedigree. The act of comparing is such a basic human impulse that comparisons between societies are presumably as old as societies themselves. More specifically, in the period of professionalised history, a comparative method was already proposed by John Stuart Mill in the late nineteenth century, and the work of Marc Bloch in the interwar period is recognised by many as launching the comparative project in earnest.<sup>1</sup> Yet so far the field has not quite shaken off its growing pains and the debate around the proper ways of comparing, or indeed on whether it is in a historian's remit to compare at all, has continued to this day. This paper does not attempt to address all the debates surrounding comparative history, but rather it focuses on one recent development of particular interest: global history. This is perhaps currently the most settled moniker – others include but are not limited to “world history” and “transnational history” – for the widely recognised trend in the new millennium toward more inclusive, connective and non-national histories.<sup>2</sup> This emergence has had

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1 A. A. van den Braembussche, “Historical Explanation and Comparative Method: Toward a Theory of the History of Society,” *History and Theory* 28, no. 1 (1989): 10; Stefan Berger, “Comparative History,” in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner e Kevin Passmore (Londres: Bloomsbury, 2003), 161.

2 C. A. Bayly et al., “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *The American Historical Review*, 111, no. 5 (2006): 1441-42; Jürgen Kocka, “Comparison and Beyond,” *History and Theory*, 42, no. 1 (2003): 42.

important consequences for a particular category of historical comparisons, i.e. those between European and non-European entities. Global historians have sought to correct what they perceive as a fundamental Eurocentric bias in such comparisons, and to remind would-be comparativists of the complexity of global historical processes that resists being shunted into abstracted units of comparison.

As a case study, this paper examines how two works of global history have challenged and reinterpreted the so-called ‘failure narrative’ of Chinese history. The works in question are Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence* (2000) and Benjamin Elman’s *On Their Own Terms* (2005) – both have become influential landmark studies in their respective fields. Pomeranz, in particular, has become something of a leading figure for the wider global history movement, dedicating his recent AHR presidential address to a discussion of the trend.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on economic development and scientific progress, respectively, Pomeranz and Elman challenge conventional interpretations of Chinese history as a foil to European progress. It should be noted that these works are very different in scope and style: Pomeranz makes an economic argument on a grand, global scale, whereas Elman’s focus is intellectual culture in its specific, Chinese setting. It has been noted that what binds global history into a coherent movement is a “way of seeing”, rather than a particular set of questions or methodologies.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this way of seeing, a commitment to a conceptualisation of the early modern world as a globally interconnected historical sphere, that provides the common ground between the two works here. Both address in their own ways a global development – the relative rise of European powers vis-à-vis China in the early modern period – in a self-consciously global framework. Elman sets out to reconsider “the alleged failed history of science in China and the alleged victorious history of science in Europe and Japan”, both of which are for him “pieces of a larger, yet unwritten

3 Kenneth Pomeranz, “Histories for a Less National Age,” *The American Historical Review*, 119, no. 1 (2014): 1-22.

4 Bayly et al, “On Transnational History,” 1454.

global narrative of science on the planet”.<sup>5</sup> Similarly Pomeranz uses his introduction to underline his “global approach” to reconsider what have Eurocentrically been considered the “failures” of the rest of the world to emulate Europe.<sup>6</sup> The two authors, then, illustrate well the sheer variety and breadth of the global history family of approaches, while clearly addressing similar questions with a similar programme in mind.

The analysis in this paper is set out so that the first section introduces the “failure narrative” of Chinese history in more depth, and suggests why it ought to be considered an example of historical comparisons done badly; the specific critiques made by Pomeranz, Elman and likeminded scholars are also laid out and discussed in detail. The second section will then proceed to a side-by-side analysis of the two works, examining how they attempt to avoid those very same problems of historical comparison and whether they are successful in doing so. The third and final section will then argue that these two works, although in many ways employing very different approaches, can be taken together as mounting a coherent challenge – under the wider banner of global history – to conventional ways of writing comparative history. It is also argued that regardless of the critical attitude adopted toward comparative history, the approaches developed by Pomeranz and Elman should rightly be seen as part of a new, improved method of comparative history rather than something else altogether, and that comparison continues to be a valuable tool for historians provided it is used with appropriate care.

#### THE FAILURE NARRATIVE AND ITS CRITICS

What is here called – using Elman’s term – the failure narrative of Chinese history is a prominent example of the kinds of questions comparative history has been employed to answer. The underlying question of most work in this vein is: “why did Europe develop while others did not?” or more specifically “why did China fail to keep up with Europe (or Britain

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin A. Elman, *On Their Own Terms. Science in China, 1550-1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 420.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe and the Making of the World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4-9.

etc.)?” Thus the point of departure is an observed historical disparity, whereby sometime in the early modern period Europe took on a dominant role in the world whereas China, regardless of its previous wealth and might, regressed. Comparison of the two cases is then conducted in order to find the particular reasons for Chinese failure or European success, be it in the field of economics, military power, innovation or diplomacy. A representative work is Joel Mokyr’s *The Lever of Riches* (1990), a work that compares European and Chinese science, working with the assumption that economic growth follows scientific innovation, and finds that the development of China was hampered by a bureaucratic mindset among officials alongside a conservative, negative attitude toward change more widely.<sup>7</sup> More recently, a similar argument of European scientific and economic superiority has been put forward by Niall Ferguson in his *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2011), although here the focus is not specifically on China.<sup>8</sup> The idea that European societies have somehow been better suited to modernity or progress has long roots, however; in relation to China it already appeared in the eighteenth century in the writings of the Jesuit Louis Le Comte, who claimed the Chinese were incapable of comprehending European science.<sup>9</sup> This line of argument has been attacked by proponents of global history, and these critiques can be linked to the wider debate on the tenability of comparative history. Three criticisms are of particular interest here: firstly, that comparative works tend to abstract and simplify complex issues; secondly, that they are asymmetrical; and thirdly, particularly in the case of comparisons that encompass non-European societies, that they are excessively Eurocentric.

The first criticism has its roots in the context in which comparative history was developed in the post-war period. As Heinz-Gerhard Haupt has noted, it was a method primarily used and applied by historical sociologists, and came to be associated specifically with

7 Joel Mokyr, *The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 236-237.

8 Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Penguin, 2011).

9 Louis Le Comte, *Memoirs and Remarks Made in Above Ten Years Travels Through the Empire of China* (London: J. Hughs, 1737), 213.

historical sociology.<sup>10</sup> Sociological methods in historical research have, however, proved controversial due to their tendency to abstract and generalise. The most famous example is the so-called deductive-nomological model developed by C.G. Hempel which sought to make the discovery of universally applicable historical laws the principle aim of historical research.<sup>11</sup> This view has been unacceptable to many historians because it requires the selective reduction of complex cases into abstracted, streamlined models and loses sight of the uniqueness of specific contexts.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, long before global history became fashionable, the cultural turn had made such sociological models unpopular. The problem with comparative history, sociologically conceived, is that it takes on the guise of “hypothesis testing”, meaning that a comparison of a range of cases is seen as a means to prove or disprove a general historical law, sacrificing detailed context-specific understanding.<sup>13</sup> Even when comparativists are not explicitly seeking laws, the very nature of comparisons requires that unique contexts are treated as comparable units. In a particularly egregious case, Ferguson’s intentionally provocative wording “the West and the Rest” seems to imply that all of the non-European world can be neatly encapsulated in one unit. In the case of the failure narrative of Chinese history, a frequent critique has been that comparativists apply a simplified, supposedly universal model of modernity or development to the case of China without trying to appreciate the specific Chinese context and questioning whether those models are applicable to China in the first place.<sup>14</sup>

A second line of criticism attacks the asymmetry of comparisons. A work of comparative history is asymmetrical, according to Jürgen Kocka, when it provides merely a “brief sketch of the history of an-

10 Heinz-Gerhardt Haupt, “Comparative History – A Contested Method,” *Historisk Tidskrift (Sweden)* 127, no. 4 (2007): 698.

11 Carl G. Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (1942): 35.

12 Kocka, “Comparison and Beyond,” 41.

13 Braembussche, “Historical Explanation and Comparative Method,” 11.

14 Benjamin A. Elman, “New Directions in the History of Modern Science in China: Global Science and Comparative History,” *Isis* 98, no.3 (2007): 522.

other country” as a foil for the primary case “... in which one is really interested.”<sup>15</sup> A work like this does not amount to a balanced comparison, as the other case is nothing more than an instrument for explaining a particular feature of the primary case. Many global historians and likeminded scholars have levelled this exact charge against the failure narrative of Chinese history, claiming – in the words of R. Bin Wong – that its proponents are primarily “interested in what makes Western Europe and England in particular special”.<sup>16</sup> The danger is apparent in the original question: the failure of China, in whatever field, only makes sense – explicitly or implicitly – relative to a European success, so the Chinese experience becomes subsumed by the European narrative. This methodological tendency is reinforced by the practical problem that many proponents of the failure narrative have tended not only to be European or American, but also to lack expertise in Chinese history and society. This is then reflected in a lack of appropriate language skills and lack of awareness of the kinds of records and evidence available.<sup>17</sup> More generally, when an author is only an expert in one of the compared cases, there is often a need to cover the gap with extensive use of secondary sources, as noted by A. A. van den Braembussche.<sup>18</sup> This by itself can distort the analysis, especially since critical use of secondary sources is much more difficult in a field one is unfamiliar with.

Asymmetry can, however, be a methodological necessity, and Kocka has argued that there is value in asymmetrical comparisons when care is taken to avoid excessive distortions: he notes especially the ability of comparisons to open up new questions and ways of thinking about familiar topics.<sup>19</sup> This kind of asymmetrical comparison cannot, however, be used to argue something substantial about the other, secondary case that has been stylised into a sketch. In such a case, asymmetry would become not a pragmatic necessity but an ideological bias. Eurocentrism

15 Jürgen Kocka, “Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The Case of the German Sonderweg,” *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (1999): 49.

16 R. Bin Wong, “Beyond Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism,” *Science & Society* 67, no. 2 (2003): 173.

17 Elman, “New Directions,” 520.

18 Braembussche, “Historical Explanation and Comparative Method,” 22.

19 Kocka, “Asymmetrical Historical Comparison,” 49.

– our third general critique – is one of the forms that bias may take when one of the compared cases is a non-European society or culture. For example, in the case of the failure narrative, asymmetry – a systematic bias in favour of Europe – is not justified as the comparison seeks to explain something substantial about Chinese history – why did China not develop? – and not merely to reflect on European development. Eurocentrism, for the purposes of this essay, is therefore understood as a form of asymmetry that is not justified by practical or methodological concerns, but rather hints at ideological preconceptions of European primacy.

These wider critiques of abstraction, asymmetry and Eurocentrism reflect the more specific ones made by Pomeranz and Elman. Pomeranz, elaborating on the dangers of abstraction, pays particular attention to what he sees as the inappropriate choice of units of comparison in comparative histories of European and Chinese economic development. In particular, he argues that comparative studies often take exceptional cases like Britain or the Netherlands to represent the Western world, and then compare these to a Chinese average on the basis that both are leading nation states in their respective spheres. However, as Pomeranz points out, due to the sheer size of China, to make meaningful comparisons one must either also include the less developed parts of Europe, or preferably – to restrict the scope of the comparison to a manageable level – compare only the most developed parts of China, like the Yangzi delta, to the most developed nations in Europe.<sup>20</sup> Pomeranz also makes another point that links into the wider critique of sociological methodology in history: he notes that conventional comparisons often assume that the cases under consideration are “essentially separate worlds”, whereas he argues that Europe and China in the early modern period were not only connected but also mutually affected by wider global conjunctures, especially the discovery of, and trade in, New World resources.<sup>21</sup> It would therefore be a mistake to consider them as analytically separate units.

<sup>20</sup> Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 4, 161.

Elman's critique touches upon both the problem of abstraction and the issue of asymmetry. He seeks to show that Western historiography has tended to underestimate Chinese science and intellectual development due to its failure to see Chinese culture in its proper framework, and that "[t]he Chinese construction of modern science, medicine, and technology *on their own terms* is a remarkable achievement".<sup>22</sup> *On Their Own Terms*, the title of his work, highlights the way Elman focuses on the use of proper terminology and the systems of thought that were native to the Chinese, thus correcting the asymmetry – and Eurocentrism – that occurs when experts on Western society attempt to force Chinese history into preconceived models. Characteristically, he starts his introduction with a section titled 'Finding the Correct Conceptual Grid' wherein he explains, among other things, how Chinese scientific classifications differed from European ones and how they were affected by the wider Chinese culture.<sup>23</sup> It is precisely these kinds of subtleties that are lost by the abstracting ethos of sociological comparisons, which looks for universal phenomena but disregards the possibility that such phenomena may have different meanings in different contexts.

#### POMERANZ AND ELMAN: GLOBAL AND LOCAL APPROACHES

*The Great Divergence* and *On Their Own Terms* are not merely critiques of conventional historical comparisons, but rather constructive contributions that also seek to correct the mistakes of the failure narrative. It is therefore interesting to see to what extent they succeed in this mission, and to what extent they provide models for overcoming the weaknesses of comparative history more widely. The works can be seen as emerging from separate wider historiographical trends: Pomeranz explicitly acknowledges the authors who have influenced his approach, most importantly R. Bin Wong and Charles Tilly, the latter in particular an important figure in the theory of comparative history.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 420 [cursive added].

<sup>23</sup> Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 7, 10.

Elman, on the other hand, represents a kind of post-colonialist and post-structuralist trend that emphasises the uniqueness of particular historical and cultural contexts and discourages generalising comparisons. It follows that Pomeranz and Elman construct their arguments in different ways, but they agree in considering the failure narrative a result of unsatisfactory comparative historical methodology. Four elements of their arguments are of particular interest to understanding the model these works offer in its place: the choice of units and frameworks; how they address the issue of asymmetry; the role of explicit and implicit comparisons; and finally, the analysis of historical connections.

Pomeranz's solution to the problem of proper choice of units of comparison is twofold. As already mentioned, he emphasises the need to carefully choose units of comparative size and nature, e.g. the Yangzi Delta and the Netherlands as thriving commercial centres of roughly equal population. Moreover, he also takes care not to reduce Europe to its most wealthy parts by also discussing areas like the Baltic.<sup>25</sup> The other solution is to use what Charles Tilly has termed encompassing comparisons, i.e. comparisons where the cases are not analytically separate but parts of the same whole.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Tilly's work on large-scale history is recognised as an important inspiration for current global history.<sup>27</sup> For Pomeranz, Europe and China are parts of a shared "integrative or global framework".<sup>28</sup> This means that historical outcomes may be determined not by internal features of the cases but by their position in the global system. For instance, in Pomeranz's analysis the profitability of European colonies was not simply due to the discovery of silver in those colonies but also due to the position of the European powers in a world economy where Chinese demand for silver made it a highly profitable commodity. Consequently, a global approach also means that the question of development cannot be represented as a dichotomy of Eu-

<sup>25</sup> Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 34.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (Nova Iorque: Russel Sage Foundation, 1984), 125.

<sup>27</sup> Sebouh Aslanian et al, "AHR Conversation: How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History," *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 5 (2013): 1434.

<sup>28</sup> Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 4.

ropean success versus Chinese failure: China could not have developed like Europe by behaving as it did, or vice versa, due to the different positions they held in the system that constrained their development and opportunities. In this way the global integrative approach strips the comparison of at least some of its Eurocentric value-laden nature.

For Elman, the choice of units is far simpler, as he is quite explicitly interested in writing a history of Chinese science. *On Their Own Terms* is not overtly comparative, but it does get its point of departure from the conventional comparative history that it challenges, seeking to redress the influence of overtly Eurocentric comparisons as the first step toward a truly “global narrative” of the history of science. Elman’s framework is therefore mostly restricted to China, but it is worth pointing out that he, like Pomeranz, considers his case as fundamentally open-ended. The China Elman describes is one in constant, dynamic interaction with the wider world; indeed, Elman devotes one entire chapter out of five to examining the encounter between Western Jesuits and Chinese intellectuals and its ramifications. It is precisely this emphasis on the significance of the wider world which brings together Pomeranz and Elman, and allows them to be seen as part of a wider historiographical trend, global history, although as two distinct strands, the former focusing more on the global level, the latter on the local. Neither, however, commits to the view of individual historical cases as analytically separable from their global context and thus comparable as abstracted, hermetically sealed units.

Asymmetry is perhaps an inevitable weakness of comparative history, but there is one important difference between *The Great Divergence* and *On Their Own Terms* on the one hand and the failure narrative as elaborated by the likes of Joel Mokyr or Niall Ferguson on the other. All of these authors are Western academics, but while Pomeranz and Elman are Westerners with an academic training in Chinese history, with all the skills and context-specific awareness this entails, Mokyr and Ferguson are Westerners specialised in Western history. Ideally a comparativist should of course have a tight grasp of both cases he or she is examining, but as U.S. citizens Pomeranz

and Elman arguably have at least some perspective on both worlds, if nothing more due to language skills. Furthermore, it is also valuable that their field of expertise is on the side of the comparison that thus far has been underrepresented in the wider debate – even if their input were in some sense Sinocentric, at the level of the wider historiography it would still have a corrective influence on the Eurocentric imbalance created by previous work.

Pomeranz also employs a conscious strategy to mitigate the problem of asymmetry. He explicitly endorses the use of two-way comparisons, as opposed to one-way comparisons that merely compare China against a normalised Western experience.<sup>29</sup> These one-way comparisons are in fact exactly what Kocka has termed asymmetrical comparisons, i.e. the use of the secondary case merely as a foil for reflecting upon the primary one. As pointed above, while Kocka sees a legitimate use for asymmetry, this does not apply to the case of the failure narrative in which historians are at least nominally trying to prove a Chinese failure, and not merely to illuminate Western history; rather than providing interesting insights, asymmetry here leads to distorting Eurocentrism. Two-way comparisons, then, are Pomeranz's way of correcting this asymmetry by refusing to take either case as the norm against which the other should be compared. The way this works in *The Great Divergence* is that, rather than just taking up certain measures of European economic success and then searching for signs of these in the Chinese context, Pomeranz examines both cases for evidence of particular areas of successful development, and then compares these against the other case. Thus, for example, he points out that Europe had an advantage in terms of livestock per capita figures, whereas China had superior water transport capacity.<sup>30</sup> Or, as he concisely asks, “[w]hy emphasize Europe’s probable edge in housing, rather than, say, the remarkable supply of safe drinking water in much of Japan, China and south-east Asia?”<sup>31</sup> This method of two-way comparisons leads Pomer-

29 Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 8-9.

30 Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 32-34.

31 Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 36.

anz to analyse particular *differences* and their effects rather than wider and inevitably normative *successes* and *failures*.

Benjamin Elman is far less explicit in terms of his methodology for avoiding asymmetry – perhaps understandably since he is not explicitly engaging in comparative history – but a similar two-way perspective runs through *On Their Own Terms*. Elman criticises conventional historiography, which tends to emphasise the backwardness of Chinese science and technology; his own argument admits that while Europeans were, by 1600, ahead of China in the use of basic machines and mechanisation, at the same time Chinese innovations like porcelain manufacture and tea production remained beyond their grasp.<sup>32</sup> However, the true contribution of Elman against the asymmetry of conventional comparisons is his painstaking research of the Chinese historical context. Elman is mostly very careful not to assume that European categories fit the Chinese case. For example, he underlines the various differences between European science or *scientia* and the Chinese concept of *gewu* or ‘investigation of things’.<sup>33</sup> He also explains that the predominant intellectual trend in early modern China, *kaozheng* or evidential learning, developed a rigorous theory of knowledge quite distinct from that promoted by European science.<sup>34</sup> The use of untranslated concepts is important, as it highlights Elman’s desire to understand the Chinese ‘on their own terms’, i.e. using a Chinese conceptual grid rather than a distorting European one.

Evidently neither *The Great Divergence* nor *On Their Own Terms* are conventional comparative histories, but they both use comparisons, although in rather different ways. Of the two, Pomeranz’s work is comparative in a far more explicit and extensive way, even though the comparisons therein are modified by his use of a global integrative framework. Much of the heavy lifting in his argument is performed by numeric and institutional comparisons: life expectancy and nutrition data, development of land markets, migration flows etc. in Europe and China are compared

<sup>32</sup> Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, xxxi.

<sup>33</sup> Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 191.

both quantitatively and qualitatively.<sup>35</sup> For these comparisons, he has to use secondary sources to get the necessary raw data, and consequently he is far more dependent on the work of others than Elman. Indeed, most of these comparisons would not seem out of place in conventional versions of the failure narrative, save for the conclusions Pomeranz draws from them. It is interesting, however, that while the numeric comparisons are similar to those used by social scientific methodologies, Pomeranz explicitly guards against drawing simple conclusions from calculations and notes that the results of such comparisons are largely defined by the categorisations employed. For example, he notes that by comparing the volume of colonial imports against British domestic products it is easy to argue that the colonies were of minor importance; but if one compares volumes of imported colonial fibres against all textile products, overseas resources suddenly seem invaluable.<sup>36</sup> He also notes that many goods had qualities that cannot be represented by numerical analysis, e.g. the addictiveness of coffee and tea and their suitability – instead of alcohol – for a working population.<sup>37</sup> In making these points, Pomeranz emphasises the value of context-specific historical research in interpreting the results of comparisons, and denounces the generalising and abstracting methodology of the historical sociologist-comparativist.

In Elman's work, the balance is reversed: rather than interpret a large mass of comparisons through additional contextualised research like Pomeranz, Elman uses a sprinkling of comparative perspectives to lay the framework for the somewhat old-fashioned primary-source-based research that forms the core of *On Their Own Terms*. Here, explicit comparisons are largely used to point out gaps and blind spots in the failure narrative, which then clears the way for Elman to make his own, context-specific argument about the development of Chinese science. Explicit comparisons are therefore much fewer in number and less important to the overall argument than in *The Great Divergence*. Notably, Elman uses comparisons to underline the respectability of

35 Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 38-39, 70, 81-82.

36 Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 279.

37 Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 281.

Chinese science, for example when pointing out the sophistication of Chinese mathematical techniques in comparison to European ones, or when claiming that early modern China experienced an intellectual movement comparable to the European Renaissance.<sup>38</sup> These, however, are not analytically rigorous comparisons of the sociological kind: rather, they fulfil an illustrative role, provoking the reader to challenge established preconceptions while maintaining the essential difference of the Chinese and European contexts. It also seems that Elman uses comparisons like these to construct a wider framework and to remind the reader that the underlying story of scientific development is essentially global, and no one case should be allowed to determine our understanding of science one-sidedly.

*On Their Own Terms* additionally, if unintentionally, draws attention to what might be called implicit comparisons, i.e. comparisons that are not consciously worked through but rather hidden between the lines, for example in the use of particular terminology and categories. Notably, Elman repeatedly and apparently subconsciously uses terms like “ancient learning”, “antiquity” or “the classics” when referring to the millennia-old scientific and cultural traditions that were still held in great esteem by Chinese scholars in the early modern period.<sup>39</sup> Such usage is in no way exceptional, yet it is a fact that those terms, apart from their generic meanings, also relate specifically to very particular referents in European history, i.e. ancient Greek and Roman history. That connotation establishes a subtle parallel – a comparison – between the relationship of modern Western societies to their Greco-Roman forebears on the one hand, and that of the Chinese to their ancestors on the other. In Elman’s work it is unclear how intentional the choice of wording is, but notably others like Q. Edward Wang have made the comparison explicit, directly relating the European Renaissance to a Chinese rediscovery of classic texts in early modernity.<sup>40</sup> Realistically,

38 Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 225.

39 Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 116.

40 Q. Edward Wang. “Beyond East and West: Antiquarianism, Evidential Learning, and Global Trends in Historical Study,” *Journal of World History* 19, no. 4 (2008): 489-519.

such implicit comparisons cannot be entirely eliminated, for all terms in all languages carry connotations that are culturally specific. However, historians should attempt to flag up wordings of this sort where the meaning of the text may be importantly affected, and explain if these are used intentionally or not. Somewhat ironically, Elman is more thorough in his insistence on explaining the Chinese concepts he uses.

Finally, an interesting feature of these two works is their treatment of historical connections. As already noted, both employ – although in different ways – a global framework, and one that recognises the fundamental interconnectedness of the world. It comes as no surprise, then, that connections play significant roles in the arguments developed in both works. For Pomeranz, as already noted, the Chinese demand for silver is an important underlying factor in the profitability of the European colonies and consequently in the development of Europe; likewise, Pomeranz argues that the import of Chinese porcelain and textiles to Europe stimulated European consumerism.<sup>41</sup> For Elman, it is important to recognise the influence of the scientific knowledge transmitted to the Chinese court by European Jesuits on the development of Chinese intellectual trends.<sup>42</sup> Both works deviate from the conventional form of historical comparison by placing such importance on connections. Indeed, in a very concrete sense, both Pomeranz and Elman are writing *global* histories that cross boundaries rather than comparing separate units. More widely, it is this awareness of the connected nature of the historical world that is often cited as the primary contribution of the global history approach.<sup>43</sup> It is also important to note that connections are not here treated as unproblematic phenomena. Elman, in particular, pays close attention to how European science was contextualised and understood in specifically Chinese terms, and how the process of transfer was shaped by the conflicting interests of the Jesuits. For example, he points out how the absorption of European astronomic ideas in China was long impeded by the reluctance of the Catholic Jesuits to teach the Copernican idea

41 Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 157.

42 Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 24.

43 Bayly et al, “On Transnational History,” 1446.

of heliocentrism.<sup>44</sup> By focusing on the limitations and specific agendas of the agents of transfer, Elman turns the conventional narrative on its head: instead of arguing, like Mokyr and others, that the Chinese were not interested enough in scientific ideas to embrace superior European theories, Elman points out that Chinese scholars were actively and critically engaging with ideas that were however presented to them in an incomplete and unsatisfactory form and consequently rejected.

### THE FUTURE OF COMPARISON

Evidently *The Great Divergence* and *On Their Own Terms* are very different works, the former attempting a grand analysis on a global scale and the latter for the most part happy to confine itself to a context-specific, old-fashioned study of Chinese history. It might seem questionable to take such disparate works as representative of a coherent approach, let alone a wider historiographical trend, as this paper does. Yet the similarities, in underlying vision if not in method, are equally striking and justify that decision. Primary among those similarities are a staunchly anti-Eurocentric motive and a commitment to a global approach. In Elman's case, for example, this means a determination to write a history of a China intimately connected with, and influenced by, its global context, or as he puts it elsewhere, a history "that is both globally and locally informed".<sup>45</sup> The two specific works here have been chosen for their undeniable influence on the field, yet it should be noted that they are far from unique, representing instead a much wider movement with a globalist ethos. Pomeranz's work, as noted, builds especially on the research of R. Bin Wong and also has many similarities with the similarly influential *ReOrient* of Andre Gunder Frank in its attempt at an unbiased, global economic history.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Benjamin Elman is far from alone in his reassessment of Chinese intellectual history. For example, Fa-ti Fan's examination of science in twentieth-

44 Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 105.

45 Elman, "New Directions," 517.

46 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

century China has sought to challenge binaries of Western-Chinese and traditional-modern.<sup>47</sup> Zuoyue Wang, like Elman, has criticised Western narratives of Chinese science for their lack of proper primary research.<sup>48</sup> Grace Shen, again highlighting the importance of connections, has sought to problematise the reception of “Western” science in China, focusing on context-specific motives and practical relevance instead of abstract theory.<sup>49</sup> All these works have, according to Elman, shown the need for “historicizing the Western scientific revolution in a global context” – the need for global history.<sup>50</sup> An explicit anti-Eurocentrism and a care to avoid the pitfalls of asymmetry distinguishes these works from the failure narrative proposed by such Western experts as Joel Mokyr and Niall Ferguson, who not only lack expertise in non-Western history, but moreover glance over the complexity of global interactions with simplified schemes like Ferguson’s “the West and the Rest”.

The focus on connections in *The Great Divergence* and *On Their Own Terms* associates them with two other important recent historiographical trends: cultural transfer studies and so-called entangled histories. The concept of cultural transfer was developed by Michel Espagne as a direct critique of comparative history; for Espagne, the field is excessively based on the comparison of national units, which then reinforces a narrative of nations and national histories as self-contained units, systematically disregarding the variety of connections and transfers that take place between such units.<sup>51</sup> The underlying ethos is thus very similar to that of Pomeranz and Elman, the difference being that Espagne draws his examples from a specifically European rather than a global sphere; likewise, his focus is on trans-national rather than trans-regional transfers. Entangled history or *histoire croisée*, as developed by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, is a related concept that examines various “intercrossings” between societies. In this ap-

47 Fa-ti Fan, “Redrawing the Map: Science in Twentieth-Century China,” *Isis* 98, no. 3 (2007): 524-538.

48 Zuoyue Wang, “Science and the State in Modern China,” *Isis* 98, no. 3 (2007): 558-570.

49 Grace Shen, “Murky Waters: Thoughts on Desire, Utility, and the «Sea of Modern Science»,” *Isis* 98, no. 3 (2007): 584-96.

50 Elman, “New Directions,” 522.

51 Michel Espagne, “Sur les limites du comparatisme en histoire culturelle,” *Genèses* 17 (1994): 120-121.

proach, the elements studied “are not fixed, but are instead defined on the basis of their dynamic interrelationships”; this draws attention to how the process of transfer is inherently constitutive of the meaning and use of the object of transfer, at both ends of the exchange.<sup>52</sup> This is in many ways similar to Elman’s analysis of the partial absorption of European ideas in China. Indeed, it seems certain that global history has been influenced by the same ideas that have led to the development of these two fields, but the emphasis on a concrete global framework separates Pomeranz and Elman from both cultural transfer studies, which have tended to focus on transnational exchanges, and *histoire croisée*, which has so far been developed more on a theoretical than an empirical level, as noted by Heinz-Gerhard Haupt.<sup>53</sup> It is therefore appropriate to consider global history a distinct historiographical trend.

Perhaps more important than drawing lines between a family of approaches that have undeniable similarities, however, is to examine what lies behind this wider recent interest in redefining comparative history. Philippe Ther has pointed out that the European integration of the past few decades has pushed historians to develop models that move beyond the isolated nation state and appreciate the shared aspects of the European experience, leading to renewed interest in comparative history.<sup>54</sup> Bruce Mazlish has made a similar point about the contemporary debate about globalisation, arguing that it has provoked historians to examine global phenomena in history.<sup>55</sup> As the continued relevance of nation states in a globalised world is under debate, national boundaries have also been increasingly questioned in historical research.<sup>56</sup> This explains why so many recent approaches, like transfer studies and global history, are moving away from the sociological model

52 Michael Werner e Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006): 50.

53 Haupt, “Comparative History,” 713.

54 Philipp Ther, “Beyond the Nation: The Relational Basis of a Comparative History of Germany and Europe,” *Central European History* 36, no. 1 (2003): 45.

55 Bruce Mazlish, “Comparing Global History to World History,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no. 3 (1998): 389-91.

56 Chris Lorenz, “Comparative Historiography: Problems and Perspectives,” *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (1999): 36.

of comparing one nation to another as if they were analytically separate entities. Not every work of global history is, like *The Great Divergence*, explicitly comparative; yet the ethos of global history, imagining a global, interconnected historical sphere and reinterpreting analytical concepts such as modernity or science in global, rather than Eurocentric terms, has the potential to radically alter the ground on which further historical comparisons are made. *On Their Own Terms* is a case in point, providing a primarily Chinese narrative but simultaneously debating with and challenging a whole historiography of Chinese science understood in conventional comparative terms. For the same reason, global history also challenges historical comparisons on smaller, decidedly non-global scales: of importance is not that the comparison spans the whole world, but that the approach is methodologically open-minded and refrains from presuming analytical boundaries where historical connections may have existed.

No fundamental reason exists for why connected cases cannot be compared. Indeed, Marc Bloch himself noted that connections *justify* comparisons, as they provide a shared framework for the observed phenomena: for Bloch, this allows conclusions “... at once much less hypothetical and much more precise”.<sup>57</sup> It is merely the law-seeking, generalising method of historical sociology that is undermined by connections: the logic of hypothesis-testing requires a set of separate but comparable cases, an analogy of the repeatable laboratory experiment of natural sciences; instead, global history – the extreme form of history of connections – provides a case of one, a global story that develops unevenly and differentially but as one whole. This is a framework for comparisons that allows the drawing of insights rather than laws. This anti-generalising aspect, and the rejection of hermetic national or cultural categories that goes with it, is a defining feature of the new comparative history, if such a term is allowed, that global history is a part of.

<sup>57</sup> Marc Bloch, “Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés Européennes,” *Revue de synthèse historique* 46 (1928): 19 [translation mine].

## CONCLUSION

Intellectuals have always had an interest in comparing societies, in contrasting the exoticism of far-away places against the familiarity of home. In the globalised world of today, however, there is an increasing awareness that such comparisons should avoid one-sided conceptualisations and frameworks. This is well captured by the titles of the two works considered here. Kenneth Pomeranz pointedly sets out to explain “the great divergence”, rather than the great success of Europe, or the great failure of China, leaving aside the Eurocentric value judgment that weighs down so much other work on the topic. Likewise, Elman wants to replace the narrative of the backwardness of Chinese science – from a European perspective – with an analysis that appreciates the scientific development of the Chinese “on their own terms”.

In a sense, these are two sides of the project that is global history, the one attempting an unbiased survey on the largest scale, without prioritising any locale, the other seeking to appreciate the uniqueness of the local without losing sight of its global context. On an ideological level, both works avoid labelling one model of development superior to another, but rather try to understand the context-specific logic and the historical contingency that led Europe and China to take different paths. Methodologically, both works acknowledge that all regional and national units of analysis are merely provisional tools for making sense of what is a fundamentally global story. It is too early to say whether global history will come to be preferred over other forms of comparative history, and indeed this may not even be desirable: comparative history is a broad enough field that distinct approaches are probably needed to complement each other. What is certain is that the resurgence of the global perspective in works like *The Great Divergence* and *On Their Own Terms* has already provided fresh insights into old questions and challenged conventional orthodoxies.

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