

Research Article

The Nile and the Yellow River: Comparative Studies between Ancient Egypt and China

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving landscape of comparative research between ancient Egypt and China, focusing on various aspects such as culture, writing systems, political economy, and motivations behind these comparisons done in China and international environments. Embedded with the historical context, motivations and methodologies of scholars engaged in this comparative endeavour, the authors suggest that such research is linked to modern China's intellectual history and global engagement. It discusses potential motivations, including economic factors, national agenda and interdisciplinary integration. The authors also raise the need for more deliberate theorizations of Egypt–China comparisons, emphasizing the importance of greater reflexivity and inclusivity in shaping the trajectory of comparative studies. Overall, the document sheds light on the complexities, motivations and potential impacts of Egypt–China comparative research, highlighting its relevance in understanding both historical civilizations and contemporary global dynamics.

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Introduction

As China is becoming more prominent in global affairs, like East and South Asia as a whole (Khanna 2019), so it is becoming more important in research on Egypt's distant past. Either directly through its first excavation in Luxor (Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2019) or indirectly as an object of comparative studies, Egypt–China comparisons become more frequent on both sides of Eurasia. A Chinese narrative of a 'dialogue between the oldest civilizations', Egypt and China, accompanies this emerging research interest in the context of cultural diplomacy along the Belt and Road Initiative (Langer 2023; Winter 2019), China's comprehensive and holistic transcontinental infrastructure construction and cultural exchange proposal. In July 2022, a symposium organized by the Center for Comparative Studies of Ancient Civilizations CAH (Chinese Academy of History) and the Institute of World History CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) highlighted the importance of 'Comparison of Civilizations' (C. Wang 2022).

This paper uses a bibliometric approach (Broadus 1987) to review and assess trends in Egypt–China comparisons,

considering their alignment with current geopolitical dynamics. We also examine the directionality of research, whether it enhances knowledge of both civilizations or focuses on one informing the other. Unlike Wei *et al.* (2023), the output is currently manageable without the need for big data analysis. Our data stem from the *Online Egyptological Bibliography* (OEB) and the *China National Knowledge Infrastructure* (CNKI), the largest academic portal in Chinese. We also refer to the *National Social Sciences Database*, which includes some journals not included in CNKI. Additionally, we traced the publications of the limited number of Egyptologists in China. Even if we missed individual entries in this vast dataset, the macro-trend stands given the amount of information we have collected. Our data introduce Chinese scholarship to international readers, which is otherwise behind a hard language barrier, and thus help overcome the rift between Chinese and non-Chinese scholarship. Beyond the review of research, we aim to intervene precisely at the time such comparisons are fast developing. We thus hope to contribute to both comparative history and an enhanced understanding of past and current Chinese and non-Chinese research traditions for the benefit of future work.

Themes in comparative works

For a discussion on trends in Egypt–China comparisons in China and the West, we split our post-1860s dataset into four thematic categories: general comparisons on Egypt

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and China; political economy/thought, including works on socio-economic/political organization; culture and writing, which includes arts and the language system ('high culture'); and science. Due to the numerous Chinese-language works on culture and writing and our summary treatment of these works, we have decided to list them in an annexe rather than in the main bibliography.

General comparisons

In 2017, the Berlin State Museums (BSM) launched an exhibition in collaboration with Shanghai Museum. The exhibition juxtaposed ancient Egyptian and pre-/early imperial Chinese objects per the themes of 'daily life', 'writing', 'death and afterlife', 'belief' and 'rule and administration'. The rationale of such a juxtaposition of these two spatio-temporally removed civilizations (Jung 2016; Seyfried 2017) was to highlight the prerequisites for the formation of complex societies and both societies' impact on the human species generally. The conclusion was that China and Egypt shared similarities but also had differences. This collaboration itself emerged from a 2012 visit of the BSM general management to Shanghai (Jung 2016, 15). Beyond that, little official information is available on how the collaboration came to be or why; we speculate on this further below.

In 2016, Nanjing Museum organized a similar exhibition with Egyptian objects loaned from the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) (Nanjing Museum 2016). The exhibition (catalogue) dedicated half each to pharaonic Egypt and Han China. Contrary to the Berlin exhibition, there was no conceptual overlap between the two except in the forewords, which highlight superficial commonalities in funerary culture yet acknowledge that Egypt and China had little in common, given the spatio-temporal differential; rather, the exhibition sought to introduce the wider world to Chinese audiences (Nanjing Museum 2016, 4–9).

Barbieri-Low (2021) offers a comprehensive comparative study of Egypt and China, exploring aspects like geography, foreign policy, law, writing and religious beliefs. It primarily focuses on case studies from the Egyptian New Kingdom and Han China. Like the 2017 Berlin exhibition, this work is tailored for a general audience. It emphasizes the scarcity of Egypt–China comparisons, contrasting with existing comparisons between China, Rome, or Greece, and highlights both seemingly significant parallels and distinctions (Barbieri-Low 2021, 8, Epilogue). However, it lacks a theoretical foundation for these comparisons (Stefanović 2022). No general comparative monograph has been published in Chinese, contrary to works comparing China with an assumed western civilization (Jiang 2006; Z. Liu 2009; Wang 2011; Zhang 1991), including Egypt, Mesopotamia (e.g. Lin 2004), India and Greece. Although short articles exist, none have gone beyond the logic of juxtaposing similarities and differences.

Political economy/thought

The political and economic organization of Egypt and China and the study of ideology have been a mainstay in comparative works. Among political economy studies, Warburton

(2016) stands out. Searching for an integrated theory of the Bronze Age economy, he has included premodern Chinese economics (money, labour, etc.) as a means of comparison to approach Egyptian and Mesopotamian fiscal regimes and their place in the global history of economics. Characteristic in this work is the inclusion of China in a 'Bronze Age world system' (Warburton 2016). Warburton's research can be regarded as a complement to the work of Scheidel, who occasionally compares China and Rome as part of his studies on early empires (e.g. Scheidel 2009).

The role of forced migration in political economy has also gained recent attention. Langer (2021a), in his study on Egyptian deportation policies, included early and modern China in a comparative framework to identify recurring patterns in deportations. This crucially integrates China with other premodern and modern case studies in a universalist approach to deportations. Egypt and China appear in the global context.

Zeuske's (2019) global and diachronic approach to the history of slavery is noteworthy in this context. Understanding slavery (slaveries and slave systems) as a universal phenomenon, he does not conduct an outright comparison of slaveries in Egypt and China; he does so indirectly by embedding both in a global framework. Egypt and China, together with other case studies, make global patterns visible. Comparison here does not serve as the goal, but rather leads to insights about broader human development. Limited attention is given to considerations of ancient Egyptian slavery, largely due to a lack of systematic research on the topic by the late 2010s, coupled with the controversy surrounding it. A recent collection on the semantics of slavery and asymmetrical dependencies (Bischoff & Conermann 2022) touches on ancient China and Egypt, but does not involve comparisons as such and is thus not part of our dataset. Likewise, Pargas & Schiel (2023) outline key themes in each contribution to facilitate comparability of case studies, leaving the actual comparisons to the audience.

Comparisons of ideology have witnessed a surge in recent years. The most fundamental study, Poo (2005), compares the attitudes toward foreigners in Mesopotamia, Egypt and China, and how foreigners were seen as uncivilized or able to integrate. Poo aimed at a more general understanding of human societies. Langer (2018, 58–64) includes early China via the Sino-Barbarian dichotomy in his discussion of an Egyptian frontier concept. Understanding frontier concepts as spatial ideologies, he integrated the 'Mandate of Heaven' (*tianming*) and 'All under Heaven' (*tianxia*) with concepts in Roman and early modern European thought in an analysis of an Egyptian frontier concept. Recently, Moreno García and Pines (2020) focused on the Egyptian concept of Ma'at and the Chinese *tianxia*, generally dealing with the legitimation and spatial construction of social order through both these different, only partially similar concepts. They encourage future research by asking whether the arguably more flexible and inclusive *tianxia* accounted for the longevity of Chinese civilization in comparison to the more rigid and exclusive Ma'at. While in our opinion Ma'at and the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), due to their

focus on kingship and its role in the cosmic order, may have made for a better comparison, such work illustrates the vibrance and potential of comparative research into political thought.

Egypt–China comparisons also feature in research on early state formation, albeit more indirectly via the discussion of recurring patterns rather than outright head-to-heads. The point there is to infer globally recurring patterns from regional case studies. Earlier examples are Trigger's (1993; 2003) comparative works on early civilizations, where Egypt and China help infer the trajectory of human societies. More recently, Charvát (2013) discussed the state formations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China and condenses commonalities without direct comparisons. With a similar goal in mind, archaeological science has subjected these and Pre-Columbian states to computer modelling to trace recurring patterns in territorial expansion (Spencer 2010). As early state formation reflects political economy and thought, these feature regularly in this context.

Although studies concerning political economy/thought once dominated Chinese Egyptology, especially before the 1980s (Tian 2017), the politics of ancient Egypt and China are rarely juxtaposed. One of the reasons could be that Marxist thought pre-establishes China's position on ancient Egyptian political economy and renders further comparisons moot. Nonetheless, a few works deal with comparisons of eminent figures in Egyptian and Chinese history, such as Hatshepsut and Wu Zetian or Akhenaten and Wang Mang (Shi 2014a, b; X. Zhou 2007),¹ legal and bureaucratic practices (T. Huang 2023; Shen 2008; Xie 2017; Zhao 2021), and the 'Asiatic' mode of production (Y. Li 2021).

We do not delve into the extensive debate on the Marxian Asiatic Mode of Production and Oriental/Hydraulic Despotism (Marx [1857] 1983; Wittfogel 1957). These theories group various premodern societies based on centralized power and labour organization and ultimately relate to periodization. Egypt–China comparisons are indirectly linked to this discourse through assumed commonalities in socio-political organization, albeit from a global perspective. Zingarelli (2015) delivers a comprehensive overview of research and critiques regarding Egypt. Trigger (2003, 23–7) provides insight into comparative studies influenced by Wittfogel. The general idea of hydraulic despotism, the assumed antagonism between West and East as democratic *versus* despotic, is largely rejected in Chinese scholarship and often perceived as a Eurocentric debate. What with Wittfogel's work available in Chinese since 1989, a critical volume assembling Chinese perspectives saw publication in 1997 (Li & Chen 1997). Fan (2021, 128–52) provides an extensive overview of the reception of the Asiatic mode of production by Chinese scholarship and its ambivalent relationship with the characterization of Chinese history.

Culture and writing

Chinese comparative scholarship is characterized by brief articles (see Figure 3 below)—64 per cent of our sample are up to five pages long. This is especially true in the field of cultural studies, including arts (or visual culture),

and myth/religion (including funerary practices and architecture) (Annex Category A: Ling 1967; Gao 1995; Shi 1997; Zhang 1998; Cao 2003; G. Yang 2004; Liu 2005; Yuan 2009; Liang 2010; Mosemujia 2011; Bahaaeldin Nemataalla Darwish 2013; Jia 2014; C. Wang 2014; Wang 2017; Chang 2015; He 2021; Poo 2022, 170–89; G. Yang 2022; Z. Yang 2022; Zhou & Li 2023; Poo 2023; Yu 2024). Art has received the greatest attention (Annex Category A: Fang 1985; Zhao & Tang 2002; Guo 2007; Xiang 2008; Lv 2009; Chen & Hu 2010; Guo 2010; R. Chen 2011; Feng 2012; M. Sun 2012; M. Li 2014; L. Liu 2014; W. Chen 2015; Liu 2015; Wei 2015; D. Yang 2016; Yang & Tian 2016; J. Li 2017; Y. Li 2017; Qin 2017; J. Sun 2018; Zeng 2020; Xie 2022; Yang & Yang 2022), where comparisons with Han stone carving proliferate (Annex Category A: Fan 1997; Li 2009; Cui & Yi 2011; Zhou 2011; Zhuang 2013; Dong 2014; J. Chen 2015; Tang 2016). However, most works enumerate similarities and differences in a superficial manner, without elaborating why the phenomena existed (see also Weber 1998, 385–6) or theorizing why one should compare them in the first place. Funerary practices and religious beliefs are another focus, as Liu Wenpeng (1996), the 'Founder of Egyptology in China', once compared Chinese and Egyptian traditions in his only comparison of the sort. Wang Yin delivered another Egypt–China study, pointing out opposing trajectories in the development of burial structures in China and Egypt (Y. Wang 2020). Representations of animal figures like snakes, birds, or dragons have inspired comparative works as well. Puzzlingly, for all his cross-cultural interest in beads (Xia 2014), Xia Nai recognized potential parallels in Egyptian and Chinese beads, but did not produce comprehensive comparisons (Tian 2017, 179–80); in turn, he did compare Egyptian and Han Chinese idioms (Annex Category A: Shiah 1938).

Writing has been a staple of comparative Egypt–China research due to superficial similarities of the Egyptian and (early) Chinese writing systems. While Goldwasser (2022) recently compared Egyptian with Sumerian and Chinese classifiers, mainly Chinese scholarship focuses on this topic. Ever since the first Qing diplomats travelled to Egypt and western European capitals in the 1860/70s, scholarship has understood that both writing systems shared functional and aesthetic similarities. Tian (2021, 62) outlines how Chinese authors at the time likened the Egyptian to the Chinese writing system (Annex Category B: Bin 1891, 45; Xue 1891, 86; Chen Jitong cited after Y. Zhang, 1896b, 23; Y. Zhang 1896a, 82; Y. Song 1897; S. Chen 1907; Ye 1979; Li Fengbao cited after Zeng 1981, 56; T. Wang 1982, 80, 132; Guo 1984, 233–4; Zou 1986, 17; D. Zhang 1997, 103), linking Egyptian with Chinese aesthetics and revealing the Chinese literati lens, where Egyptian hieroglyphs appear as the first stage of writing outside China. In the imposition of Chinese terminology on Egyptian writing any comparison is at least implicit. Note that these works are often diaries and mention Egyptian only in passing, as opposed to later dedicated academic studies.

Research on writing and political economy intersect when writing serves as a lens for examining the latter, as seen in comparative studies of multiple premodern

societies. While writing and political economy are intertwined, it seems wise to separate them for our comparisons, since research often focuses on the mechanics of writing systems rather than their broader socio-political roles. Perhaps comparative research depends on the lens it employs. The works mentioned above primarily use a political economy lens, while subsequent works emphasize a writing-centred perspective.

Chinese Egyptology, rooted in historical context much like archaeology (von Falkenhausen 1993), initially emerged from a focus on Chinese writing proficiency and a desire to compare it with similar scripts. This research became entangled in opposing strains of Chinese nationalism, one tracing descent from ancient southwest Asian/northeast African civilizations (and thus the 'West'), while the New Culture and 'May Fourth' movements (Chow 1960; Davies 2020) emphasized China's unique origins and global interconnectedness (Tian 2017, 180–81). In the 1930s and 1940s, Li Dongfang and Huang Zunsheng compared Egyptian and the Chinese 'six writings' (Y. Chen 2011; Huang 1942).² After the establishment of New China in 1949, Zhou Youguang (1995; 1996; 1998) expanded this comparison to include Sumerian and Maya scripts, advocating for the universal application of Chinese writing principles. More recent comparative work by scholars like Li Xiaodong (Annex Category B: X. Li 1992), Yan Haiying (Annex Category B: Gong *et al.* 2009a, b), Wang Haili (Annex Category B: 2003; 2014; 2015) and Chen Yongsheng (Annex Category B: 2006; 2009; 2010; 2011a, b, c; 2020; 2024) among others (Annex Category B: Li 1984; Jiang 2004; Huang & Zhang 2010; Huang & Wang 2011; Jiang 2014; Song 2018; Liu 2020) has continued this exploration. Yan's collaborative work is a notable Chinese monograph on Egypt–China comparisons. Wang Haicheng (2013), comparing early writing systems, sheds light on the relationship between Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Americas and China. These comparisons are part of a broader global perspective in both Chinese Egyptology and early Chinese writing studies. While the recent acclaim for this research as 'pioneering' (X. Li 2020) seems questionable given its long history, its future development will be intriguing, especially considering China's evolving global role and outlook towards 2050. Y. Chen (2011) reviewed the long-standing tradition of applying the Chinese 'six writings' to highlight similarities between the Chinese and Egyptian writing systems and bemoaned the resulting repetitive scholarship and lack of theorization since the early twentieth century. Conversely, Baines and Cao (2024) compared the emergence of writing in Egypt and China relative to materiality, meaning and syntax from the vantage point of their individual specialties in Egyptology and Chinese language, ultimately employing an interdisciplinary approach.

A recent strain in cultural studies explores the reception of ancient Egyptian culture in China and East Asia. Langer (2021b; *in press*), to shift from Western-centric Egyptology, incorporates modern Chinese obelisks in a broader examination of obelisks in eastern Eurasian Asian memorial culture. This globalizes studies on cultural reception and obelisk research, using Chinese obelisks as a case study to illuminate

the intricate spatio-temporal transmission of Egyptian culture. This approach does not compare Egyptian and Chinese memorial culture directly, but instead considers their indirect interaction within the broader context of global cultural transmission and international relations. Unlike writing systems, this topic is less studied and more interdisciplinary, offering potential for new insights in the future.

Science

Comparative studies between ancient Egyptian and Chinese science, including medicine, are typically brief. There is minimal interest in this area, with only a few related works in Chinese (Annex Category C: Jiang 1992; Yang 2004; Zhang & Zhang 2007; Pan 2010; Volkova 2019; Chi 2023). Western Egyptology is yet to show interest in this subject.

Summary: the trajectory of Egypt–China comparisons

We analysed comparative works published from the 1860s onwards (Fig. 1), categorizing them into Chinese and non-Chinese language publications. This reveals distinct styles and focuses in Chinese and Western historiography as well as differing timelines. The first (implicit) Egypt–China comparisons emerged in the 1860s in travel diaries. Chinese comparative works paused in the 1900s, possibly due to the late Qing dynasty crisis and the Republic's struggles. Another hiatus occurred in the late 1960s to 1970s during challenging times for Chinese universities. Chinese comparative works are mainly (brief) journal articles. This reflects the bias in favour of journal publications in Chinese academia and raises questions about the depth of comparative research. Note that several works deal with general global comparisons. Comparative studies between Egypt and China remain a niche field within Chinese academia. Over the past two years, there has been an emergence of previously uncommon themes in science and politics; however, these articles tend to focus on the broader comparison of ancient civilizations rather than a direct comparison between China and Egypt. Cultural and artistic studies continue to be more prevalent, and it is anticipated that they will remain the primary focus of comparative research between China and Egypt for the foreseeable future. Overall, in-depth research, particularly in the form of monographs, is exceedingly rare, with Poo (2023) being an exception. This scarcity highlights an area for potential growth that scholars in this field should endeavour to address.

Chinese academia follows two main paths: One is descriptive, comparing themes like religion and tomb murals without advancing theoretical understanding, and offering brief explanations of similarities and differences within the respective civilizations. These studies often result in superficial comparisons, providing information without deepening the understanding of either civilization. The issues of inadequate knowledge of ancient Egypt, the uncritical application of Chinese concepts or methods and the lack of systematic analysis in comparative results (Y. Chen 2011) are prevalent in most descriptive studies. The other is

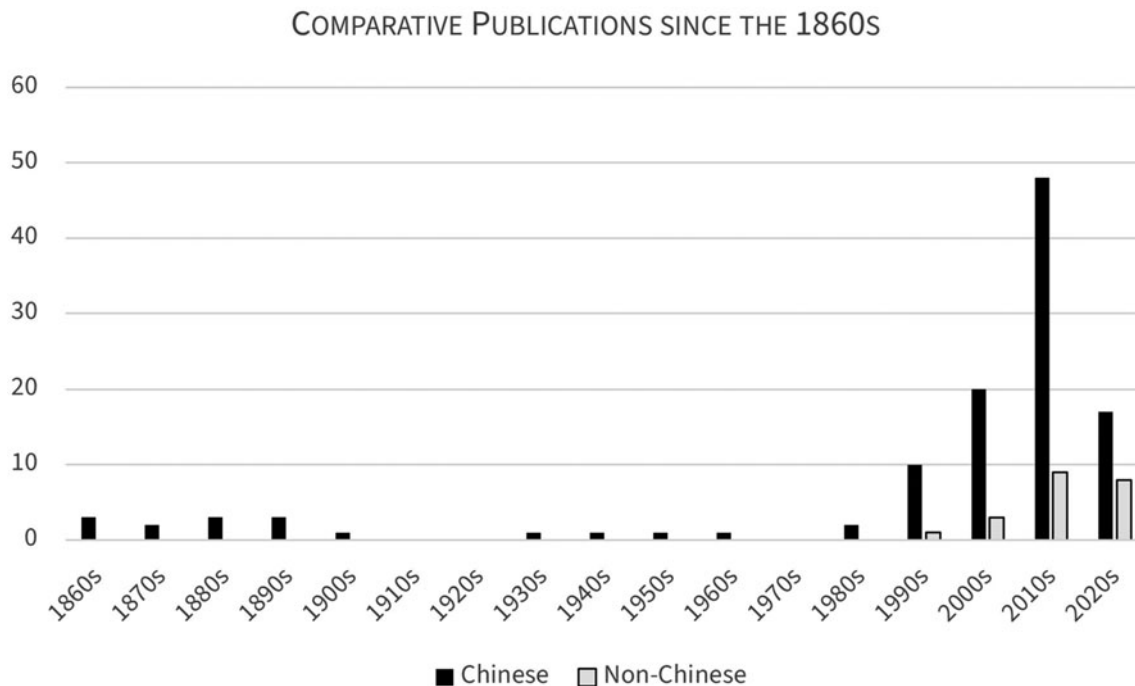


Figure 1. Number of publications comparing ancient Egypt and China in Chinese and non-Chinese languages since the 1860s. Note: Data on Chinese publications between the 1860s and 1900s taken from Tian (2021, 61, 63 tables 2, 4). Non-Chinese works are primarily in English. Six were written by Chinese authors, resulting in a lower count for non-Chinese authors. Additionally, one Chinese work was authored by an Egyptian researcher. Note that the data do not distinguish between monographs and papers. (© authors.)

question-oriented research that aims to use similar historical backgrounds or developmental stages in ancient Egyptian civilization to inform one's own field. Although the few comparative studies contribute to a deeper understanding of Chinese civilization, Chinese Egyptologists have yet significantly to enhance the understanding of ancient Egyptian civilization through such comparisons.

Chinese interest in comparative work has been relatively consistent, with a notable increase since the 1990s and a potential peak in the future. About 85 per cent of works in our dataset are in Chinese, with 82 per cent published since the 1990s. Non-Chinese interest in Egypt–China comparisons has primarily emerged post 2000, particularly in the later 2010s, making up nearly 80 per cent of registered publications. These comparisons often integrate Egypt and China with supra-regional contexts. Direct Egypt–China comparisons are much less common. Given the rise of the BRI and increased discussions on China's global role, we can anticipate a peak in comparative research in non-Chinese languages. This aligns with Trigger's (2003, 16) distinction between cross-cultural comparisons (across numerous societies) and 'intensive comparisons' of a smaller number of societies, with outright Egypt–China comparisons falling into the latter category, while the more common global comparisons fit into the former.

We used the same categorization of Chinese and non-Chinese publications to analyse the dataset across four themes (Fig. 2). These themes align with those discussed in this paper, with a separate focus on writing and culture for clarity. Note that general comparisons feature

in all categories, the total publication count may thus vary from that in Figure 1.

Chinese scholarship predominantly focuses on comparing the Egyptian and Chinese writing systems. Surprisingly, this emphasis on writing and its aesthetics contrasts with the historical interest in political economy and society influenced by Marxism in socialist countries. This discrepancy is striking, especially given the potential for comparing Egypt and China in terms of political economy. Since the 1990s, Chinese Egyptology has increasingly emphasized cultural topics, a trend that aligns with broader shifts in Chinese historiography. Previously, Egyptology in China was shaped by mainstream historiography's 'Five Golden Flowers', which emphasized political history. In the 1980s, discussions within Chinese academia about the 'Crisis of Historiography' and subsequent shifts in research directions significantly influenced the development of Egyptology in China. This discussion was particularly active between 1983 and 1988, peaking in 1986 (F. Chen 2019, 120). Li Kaiyuan (1985, 3–5) introduced the term 'Crisis of Historiography', which, despite varying scholarly perspectives, generally referred to the crisis of the materialist conception of history. This crisis emerged because the previously dogmatic Marxist historiography could not adapt to contemporary questions and issues in historical research (F. Chen 2019, 121–2, 125–6). The traditional focus on politics and economy, coupled with the neglect of societal and cultural aspects in historical studies, was critically examined. As a result, the reform of Marxist historiography spurred by this discussion led to the rise of social history

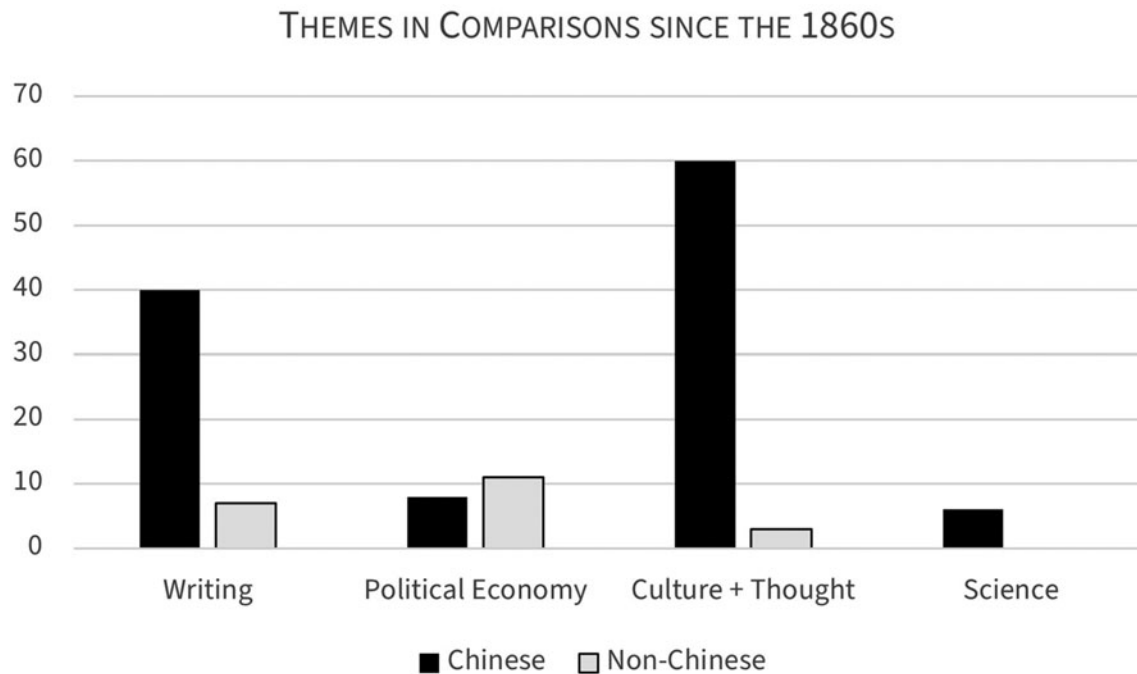


Figure 2. Number of publications comparing ancient Egypt and China in Chinese and non-Chinese languages since the 1860s relative to theme covered. Note: The same caveats pointed out in Figure 1 apply here as well. Additionally, a few works address all three broad themes, which accounts for the higher total count. Political economy encompasses ideology, and culture extends beyond writing to include topics like the cultural reception of ancient Egypt in modern China. (© authors.)

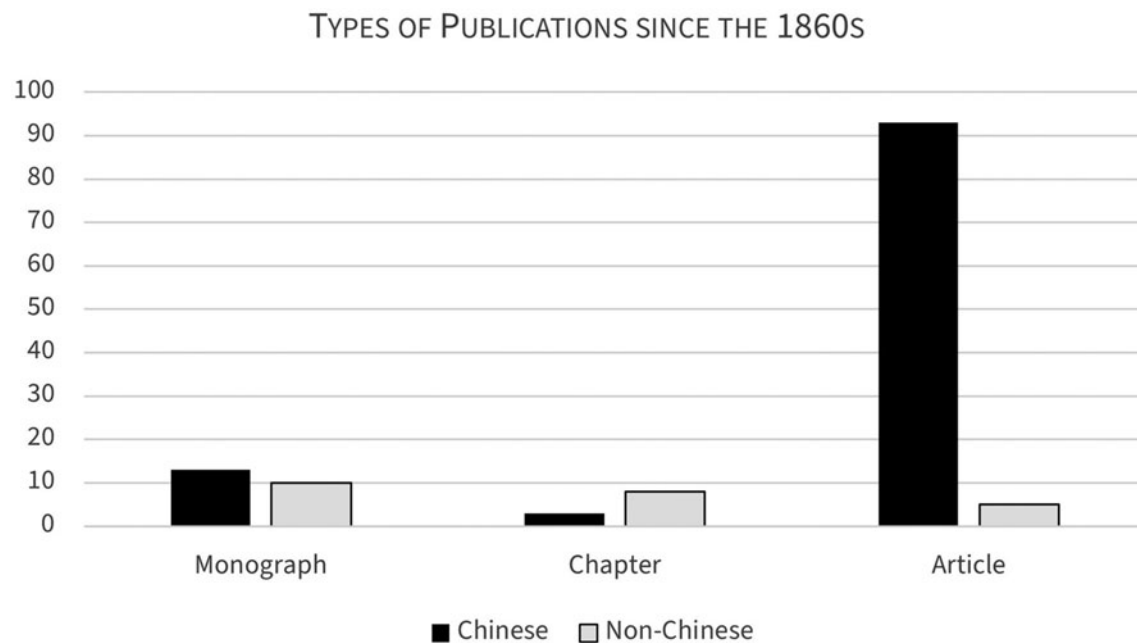


Figure 3. Number of publications comparing ancient Egypt and China in Chinese and non-Chinese languages since the 1860s by type. Note: The same caveats pointed out in Figure 1 apply. Monographs include exhibition catalogues (2). About half of the Chinese monographs are from the nineteenth century. (© authors.)

and cultural history, which were celebrated as ‘the two flying wings of historiography’ (Z. Liu 1988, 19). It is within this context that cultural studies gained prominence in the study of ancient Egypt.

Outside China, research has primarily centred on comparing Egyptian and Chinese political economy, indicating an interest in understanding China’s historical political organization through Egypt. Writing comes next in

importance, while cultural matters have received less attention thus far. Comparisons in science have not yet gained traction. Crucially, most Egypt–China comparisons are inaccessible to non-Chinese audiences due to language barriers and limited availability of Chinese publications globally. Conversely, Chinese scholars have a greater opportunity to incorporate findings from outside China into their own knowledge production, as similarly argued by Scheidel (2013, 6–7) in the context of Classical antiquity.

Looking at publication types (monographs, book chapters, journal articles) of Egypt–China comparisons since the 1860s using our Chinese/non-Chinese language differentiation (Fig. 3), non-Chinese outputs are evenly distributed, with a slight preference for monographs. On the other hand, over 80 per cent of related Chinese publications are journal articles; this figure rises to nearly 90 per cent for publications since the 1990s. This emphasis on journal articles is likely influenced by their role in academic promotion in the Chinese system. Book publications primarily appeal to tenured faculty, while non-tenured academics are incentivized to communicate their findings through articles.

Discussion

As the data and related discussion below indicate, a review of comparative research on ancient Egypt and China highlights the broader relevance of such studies to other regions, as it underscores how comparative approaches are influenced by cultural predispositions, national policies, and personal agendas. These factors, which may well vary significantly across different regions, affect the perspectives and conclusions drawn by scholars as well as the initial research questions. One may hypothesize that the greater the cultural distance in scholarship, the greater the differential in agendas. For instance, that distance is comparatively wide between Western and Chinese scholarship but may well be narrower in entirely East Asian or Western settings, as in China and Japan or Europe or South America. These questions are worthy of pursuit in the future and should become more relevant as a multipolar world order visibly materializes in academic affairs as well.

Consequently, researchers must remain cognisant of their own biases and the contexts within which they operate. By acknowledging these influences, scholars can work towards more balanced and objective comparative studies, ultimately enriching the field of comparative historical research across diverse cultural and regional contexts.

Motivations and rationales

Judging by quantity, the prime contributors to comparative Chinese scholarship are not academics trained in Egyptology, and China specialists have yet to pay more attention to this field. The Chinese works discussed here often treat Egypt–China comparisons as introductions to a theme, which may explain the large number of descriptive works.

In-depth monographs among the published studies have largely come from Chinese Egyptologists or specialists in

ancient Chinese culture. Crossing the language barrier of modern and classical Chinese is crucial for in-depth research; there may thus be no more than 20 Egyptologists around the world who are competent in comparative studies between China and Egypt. The advantage for Chinese Egyptologists in conducting comparative study of China and Egypt is obvious. In addition to language, ancient Chinese history is usually a compulsory course for all (world) history majors in Chinese higher education. Although world historians may not be as familiar with ancient China, it will not be completely strange to them as a reference point. Any researcher adopting a material culture approach will find Egypt–China comparisons a potential field of study. Although one cannot rule out that pure academic interest may arise from collisions between different cultures, or even for no specific reason, opportunistic searches for topics and ideological concerns are potentially relevant motivations.

Comparative research between ancient Egypt and China is deeply intertwined with modern Chinese intellectual history. This parallels the relationship between Europe and its intellectual legacy, though the latter is better understood. In China, there are two main motivations for Egypt–China comparisons. One aims to integrate Chinese civilization into global history for a better understanding of China and human societies. The other seeks to define China's position in the world, either as distinct or inseparable from the broader global context. These perspectives influence how China conceives of itself—either as a unique entity, or as a part of the global human experience; or authenticity *versus* globality, as in the case of Sino-Babylonianism (see Sun 2017). Both perspectives trace Chinese civilization back 5000 years for legitimacy. Historically, the second form of Chinese nationalism sought connection with the West, responding to perceived European colonial dominance during the late Qing dynasty (on the developments at the time, see Bickers 2011). This was a response to assert China's modern statehood. The outward-looking variant aligns with the intellectual foundations of the ongoing BRI, which envisions Eurasia as a sphere of peaceful cooperation proposed by China (see Winter 2019, esp. 130–31). According to Tian (2024; *in preparation*), Chinese literati of the late Qing dynasty used similarities between Chinese and Egyptian writing to conceptualize ancient Egypt as a Chinese offshoot, or equal to China, to make sense of and challenge the alleged ancient roots of Western civilization. The surge in comparative Chinese scholarship over the past decade may have resulted from an opportunistic connection with the BRI, the cultural diplomacy of which contributes to building 'cultural confidence' (Xinhua 2022); alternatively, it may stem from a pressure to publish under the Chinese academic system, or a combination of both.

The popular Chinese awareness of the 'Four Ancient Civilizations' (四大文明古国) may be related.³ The idea of 'Ancient Civilization' (文明古国) dates to the late Qing period and has been passed down to the present as a cultural consensus; hence, Chinese scholars without a formal training in Egyptology can naturally relate ancient China and Egypt. In the eyes of foreign scholars, both are spatially

and spiritually so far apart that it seems counter-intuitive to juxtapose the two, yet even an average Chinese who knows little about ancient Egypt will still experience a sense of familiarity and will not question the viability of Egypt–China comparisons.

Western researchers, not bound by Chinese national concerns, may have diverse motivations for Egypt–China comparisons. These studies, particularly direct comparisons without involving other societies or regions, are relatively new in western historiography and it is challenging to determine specific motivations in individual cases. The fact that most of these studies emerged alongside China's resurgence raises questions about the extent of genuine interest in a sincere engagement with China, its culture, history and people on the part of western researchers. As Cheng Yangyang (2021), a Chinese physicist at Yale University, observed in *The Guardian* in another, yet similar context:

As China develops from an impoverished backwater into the world's second largest economy, many in the west have looked to it as fertile ground for promising careers. Their passion is not in Chinese history or culture, at least not as a priority. To the corporate elite, China is a market to be mined. To the security expert, China is a threat to be addressed. To the politicians and pundits, China is a 'problem' to be solved. The lives and wellbeing of Chinese people, affected by policies, rhetoric and business deals, barely register in these discussions. Knowledge of the local language becomes irrelevant when the natives are presumed silent.

Cheng highlights Western experts' ulterior motives, perhaps echoing the historical *Scramble for China* during the Qing dynasty (Bickers 2011, esp. chapter 6 'China El Dorado'). This pertains to the influx of experts after China opened for foreign business ventures in the late 1970s and '80s. It raises questions about whether western scholars similarly prioritize China's utility as a market over genuine engagement with its culture and people. Egypt–China comparisons could be viewed as a delayed humanities version of this trend. Institutional interests are more evident, with overseas campuses (Ennew & Yang 2009; Fazackerley & Worthington 2007) and collaborations between Chinese and Western museums –this includes the BSM, the ROM, Manchester Museum and the Egyptian Museum of Barcelona–driven by economic considerations (Coates 2019; X. Liu 2019) despite pushing a 'global cultural exchange' narrative. For Chinese academics, comparative works can enhance novelty and publication chances. Additionally, the surge in comparisons with China may stem from a Cold War-era practice of 'China Watching' (compare the declassified Central Intelligence Agency 1975 secret document: Solin 1975), extending beyond contemporary affairs to ancient history.

Egypt–China comparisons outside of China are a recent development. More frequently, they are integrated with larger regional contexts rather than being an independent focus. Some outright comparisons aim to offer insights into broader issues, yet often fall short of demonstrating precisely how or suggest future work will fulfil this promise

(e.g. Barbieri-Low 2021, Introduction; Moreno García & Pines 2020).

Egypt–China comparisons can serve as a proactive way to engage with the increasingly significant role of China and eastern Eurasia as a whole (Langer 2021b, 125). To realize this fully, the comparisons should extend beyond China and incorporate adjacent societies in the long run. This shift could transform the study of ancient Egypt from a predominantly Western endeavour to a truly global one. In this context, Egypt–China comparisons could facilitate the integration of Chinese (and broader East Asian) perspectives on human history into research (compare K.-H. Chen 2010; see Langer 2023 for potential effects of an increasing Chinese role in Egyptology).

Concluding remarks and outlook

In 2017, classicists Mutschler and Scheidel (2017) suggested Chinese scholars took advantage of comparative research in ancient history. Comparative studies between Classics and Chinese studies have yielded results and enjoyed a more even global distribution concerning scholars' nationality and language of publishing (e.g. Ando & Richardson 2017; Beck & Vankeerberghen 2021; King 2005; J. Liu 2010; Lloyd & Sivin 2002; Ma 2020; Mutschler & Mittag 2008; Robinson 2023; Scheidel 2009; Tanner 2016; 2017; 2018a, b; Wei & Liu 2015; Wu 2018), although (Chinese) scholars in Chinese history are less active in such comparisons (Y. Huang 2021). Egyptology has fallen behind Classics in comparative studies with China or, more accurately, was never ahead or level to begin with.

The central question is why we engage in comparative research, particularly in the context of Egypt–China comparisons. It is important to consider who conducts these studies and from whose perspective. As the data show (Figs 1–2), various stakeholders have distinct regional interests, indicating an East–West disconnect in comparative research.

Trigger's (2003, 14) comparative research sought to uncover specific and general similarities and differences in early civilizations, aiming to understand human behaviour and cultural change on a global scale. Scheidel (2013, 2–4) echoed this sentiment, cautioning against comparisons without purpose and advocating for them as a tool to generate new questions and combat hyperspecialization. This approach could greatly benefit Egyptology and its connection to other fields of inquiry (e.g. Moreno García 2015). Feinman and Moreno García (2022, 1–6) emphasized that comparative research should shed light on political organization and power dynamics throughout history. They also stressed that comparisons could bridge global history, breaking down artificial divisions between Western and non-Western contexts, suggesting a decolonizing aspect to comparative research (see also Brooke & Strauss 2018, 346; on Egyptology and decolonization, see Langer & Matić 2023; Lemos 2022).

Chinese classicist Huang Yang outlined the significance of comparative study, primarily focusing on a Chinese audience. He emphasized that comparative study 1) offers fresh perspectives on ancient civilizations and helps uncover their

unique characteristics; 2) that major theoretical innovations stem from comparative study; 3) that comparative study was essential for absorbing the essence of human civilization and contributing to the development and revival of Chinese civilization (Y. Huang 2021). While points 1 and 2 apply globally, point 3 underscores a national agenda, emphasizing the benefit to China. This aligns with the July 2022 symposium, which promoted comparative history research in China (C. Wang 2022). In contrast, Xia Nai, in his 1935 diary, promoted comparative approaches to advance archaeology in China (Yan 2009). This differs from the more global and integrative approach seen in comparative literature discussed earlier.

We argue that Egypt–China comparisons should have clear, target-oriented goals, whether that is interdisciplinary integration, understanding universal/global or specific phenomena, or serving an international or national agenda. Conducting comparisons merely for the sake of it may not advance knowledge effectively. Studies primarily serving a national cause may not align with comprehensive scholarly inquiry in the Humboldtian sense. It seems crucial to clarify what aspect we aim to understand better—be it ancient Egypt, China, the world at large, or contemporary issues. Additionally, studies should articulate their rationale for comparing specific societies, considering broader global issues. There is a need for further theorization in comparative history (Scheidel 2013, 3) and our observations highlight the necessity for more theoretical development in this area. Moreover, it is essential to be clear about the intended audience—whether it is a specific field, multiple disciplines, or a non-specialist audience—and adjust how results are communicated accordingly.

There are several caveats to Egypt–China comparisons. For one, scholars from outside Chinese usually are not familiar with Chinese material; on the other hand, Chinese scholars bring the necessary hard knowledge, but may be unfamiliar with methodologies and theories conducive to (global) comparisons, so that their comparisons will ultimately speak only to Chinese audiences. If these caveats are any indication, it becomes clear that the way forward can only lead through cross-disciplinary (Scheidel 2013) and international collaboration if Egypt–China comparisons are to bring any long-term benefits to the field and beyond specific locales.

In the coming years, Egypt–China comparisons may become a contested arena. Well-established scholars may dominate, determining who participates and whose ideas are recognized by the academic community and the public. This could potentially hinder the inclusive and integrative nature of this endeavour, favouring established networks of patronage. The writing of a monopolization by a select group of scholars may already be on the wall, creating an artificial scarcity, as it were. To counter this, greater reflexivity in comparative studies (not only in Egypt–China comparisons) along with necessary theorizations can ensure a more inclusive engagement with this emerging field of study.

Supplementary material. For the list of Chinese-language works on culture, writing and science, please go to <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774324000349>

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Notes

1. Note that X. Zhou's (2007) much older comparison of Akhenaten and Wang Mang was apparently not consulted for Barbieri-Low's (2021, 82–113) comparison of Akhenaten and Wang Mang, as it went uncited.
2. Note that Li's comparison was part of his preface to the Chinese translation of Moret (1941); since he wrote the preface in 1937, Figure 1 assigns this work to the 1930s, although the translation saw publication in 1941.
3. Ancient Egypt, Ancient China, Ancient Babylon/Mesopotamia and Ancient India. This statement clearly goes beyond the popular level among the public. The Center for Comparative Studies of Ancient Civilizations (ancient China, Egypt, Babylon/Mesopotamia and India), established in 2019 and supervised by the Chinese Academy of History, also adopted this categorization.

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