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## *Introduction*

Now the other writers tell one about their (the Scythians) savagery, because they know that the terrible and the marvelous are startling, but one should tell the opposite facts too and make them patterns of conduct.

—Ephoros, c. 405–333 BCE

### *The Question about The Others*

A genre of fantastic stories circulated Medieval Europe that recounted strange or monstrous peoples who inhabited faraway countries—people with one foot, people with their face on their chests, people with long lips that could be used as an umbrella, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Not entirely created out of pure imagination, some of these stories had their origins in the works of Greek authors of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Travelers in late antiquity and the early Medieval period brought them back to Europe as fabulous and amusing tales about the never-never land outside the civilized world.<sup>2</sup> They were, however, more than amusing stories, since geography—that is, information about the natural and human environment in other places—was considered an essential part of the knowledge of the universe and a key component of “the truth” about the human condition.<sup>3</sup> This knowledge of the monstrous races might be seen as a way to define one’s own existence; that is, by establishing a very different “other,” sometimes exotic, often grotesque and dangerous, one gains a positive and “normal” image for oneself.<sup>4</sup> It was also a source that challenged people’s conceptions of what it means to be a human being, since there were so many incredible “variations” of mankind.<sup>5</sup>

The monstrous races described in these stories remind us of the descriptions of foreign peoples found in the *Shan-hai-jing* (山海經), or *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a Chinese text dated fourth century BCE. Comparable to the European stories, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* presented the reader with fantastic foreign lands, one inhabited by people with holes in the chest, another inhabited by one-eyed people, yet another by people with one arm and one foot, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

While it is premature or unnecessary to suggest any connection between the Greek and the Chinese sources, these stories nevertheless show that similar modes of thinking regarding things foreign could have been developed in different cultures. When describing faraway places and peoples, although it was possible that in some cases the strange or monstrous figures might have originated from misunderstandings, exaggerations, or embellishment upon received traditions, it was also a natural tendency for the storytellers to let their imagination take the reins and create exotic stories. The medieval stories of monsters as well as those contained in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, though often relegated to the realm of folklore and sometimes used by modern scholars to reconstruct ancient geography or mythological traditions, are significant in another aspect: they hint at a deep-rooted cultural psychology that connects “the foreign” with “the monstrous and devilish,” even “nonhuman” or “subhuman.” It is most likely that the stories are no less the productions of cultural consciousness that betrays the self-images of the storytellers than descriptions of “reality.” By cultural consciousness I mean conceptions of the characteristics of a culture commonly shared and employed by its people to distinguish themselves from people of other cultures. The importance of this sense of cultural identity in the formation and conflicts of peoples and countries cannot be overemphasized. The history of the modern world has provided ample evidence of the workings of cultural consciousness, such as the rise of nationalism.<sup>7</sup> In the ancient world, cultural consciousness was no less a forceful factor in the formation and development of individual civilizations.<sup>8</sup> The Greek attitude toward aliens and non-Greeks, for example, has been pointed to as the major factor in the formation of Christian civilization.<sup>9</sup> The entire history of the Jewish community can be described as a continuous effort to maintain its cultural identity by stressing a specific Jewish cultural consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Christian civilization, under the Roman Catholic Church, distinguished the “they-Pagan” from the “we-Christian,” and extended this distinction

to the moral issue of good and evil, that is, what is different from “us” is necessarily “evil.”<sup>11</sup>

The above observation seems to agree with a commonly held opinion, that in order to form a group identity and help preserve the prosperity of the community, it was natural and necessary for people to draw a line between a we-group and a they-group.<sup>12</sup> It was further taken for granted by many that prejudice against the “alien” or the “foreigner” was a natural reaction of any human society facing the “other.” While not denying that there is a certain truth in this, one should not assume that it is always the case with every ancient culture. If we look closer at the evidence, we see the picture is not always black and white; that is, the “foreigners,” for various reasons, as we shall explore in this study, were not always perceived or portrayed straightforwardly as evil.

Take for example the Greek writer Ephoros (c. 405–330 BCE), whose ethnography of the Scythians occupied an important position in the tradition of ancient geography writing.<sup>13</sup> In his account, Ephoros mentions that the Scythians were the most law-abiding people, with impeccable moral righteousness.<sup>14</sup> Here we find a highly praised foreign race that was to be envied by the Greeks. This praise of the foreign race was certainly a sort of “moralizing rhetoric,” as Ephoros himself was quoted as saying: “Now the other writers tell one about their (the Scythians) savagery, because they know that the terrible and the marvelous are startling, but one should tell the opposite facts too and *make them patterns of conduct* (italics mine).”<sup>15</sup> Although the moralizing rhetoric might have reflected some truth about the nomadic life, the nomadic reality was probably not the main concern of the Greek authors, for they were mainly interested in using the “patterns of conduct” as a moralizing tool.<sup>16</sup> In other words, it is doubtful that one could confirm that Ephoros’s actual concern was a sympathetic understanding of the nomadic people to the north. Rather, the idealized description of the Scythians was arguably part of the process of the construction of a Greek cultural identity that privileged and ennobled itself because it had risen to the height that could appreciate the “uncivilized” foreign race. Thus the act of exclusion, of division between “us” and “them” was subtly, even unconsciously, done by a “positive evaluation” of the foreigners. What was usually said about Greek prejudice against the “barbarians,” therefore, needs to be qualified by admitting that the prejudice, while it indeed existed, could have been neither simpleminded xenophobia nor straightforward slandering,

and that sources from different authors or social strata could have represented different perspectives.

The example of Ephoros indicates that ancient conceptions of foreigners or foreign lands are intimately related to the self-perceptions of the ancients themselves, and that descriptions or comments about the foreigners had more to do with the sociopolitical situations and moral-ethical values of the society that produced the comments than with the “true character” of the foreigners. In the words of one scholar, “between the (ancient) narrator and his addressee there exists, as a precondition for communication, a whole collection of semantic, encyclopedic, and symbolic knowledge common to both sides.”<sup>17</sup> In this light, what the ancient writers noted down about “the others” is not static “facts” but is circumscribed by the relationship between the narrator and his presumed audience. The “others” are indeed the others, the “third party,” of the discourse. The same argument applies to us as modern investigators. Our understanding and description of the ancients—in a sense a kind of foreigner to us—is also a reflection of our own self-perception, value system, and sociopolitical agendas, preferences, and prejudices that often have little to do with the ancients themselves.

Thus a revisit to the ancient evidence could not only produce some new understanding of the ancient mentality, but could also help us to reflect upon our own modern prejudice. For, in the case of an attitude toward foreigners, if we take it for granted that human societies are “naturally” xenophobic, this will only confirm and even perpetuate the situation. We will then discriminate against the ancients and will perhaps also show prejudice against our contemporaries, since we have subscribed to the predicament of inherent prejudice as part of human nature.

Before we proceed, it is necessary that we should further clarify the term “foreigner” in our discussion of the ancient world. Obviously, the modern idea of foreigner that refers to people from another sovereign state and with clear legal implications cannot suit the context of the ancient world. In the period under our consideration, a foreigner could be understood as someone who is from outside a certain geographical, cultural, or political sphere, or any combination of these elements. In addition, how an insider regarded other people as foreign often was based not only on these rational elements, but also on the workings of such irrational elements as prejudice and misunderstanding. All of these conditions that shaped the concept of foreigner might not

be the same under different situations and in different cultures. In a word, the concept of foreigner in the ancient world is multifarious, and what constituted “foreignness” differs in each case. We need to assess in each case what the main emphasis was when a people encounter another people that could be described as foreign. It is nonetheless important to admit the fact that any evidence we have is likely to be atypical of the phenomenon that we might like it to represent, and hence a potential distortion of the reality. What we can do is to try to judge the extent to which certain evidence could reflect the possible attitude or mentality of some of the ancients.

On the other hand, once we use the term “foreigner,” there is automatically a question as to from whose point of view this term is meaningful. Who are the “we” that are making the distinction between “we” and “they”? It would be problematic if the we is in fact a mixture that shared certain elements with they. As we shall discuss below, it has been persuasively argued that ethnic identity or the sense of us is largely a subjective construction. By the same token, the sense of they or foreigners is also a subjective construction that need not to accord with any objective reality such as physical features, lifestyles, or even cultural values. Our use of the term “foreign,” therefore, must be understood in its earlier or original meaning in Latin, that is, *forās*, outside, and consequently foreigner as outsider, people outside of the “civilized” world, for which each ancient civilization has its own terms, whether as barbarians, enemies, or others.

As for the self-identity, the “we” of the ancient civilizations under discussion, it may in fact be questionable whether the concepts of “China,” “Egypt” or “Mesopotamia” are useful or unambiguous enough in this context. In other words, we have to clarify what we mean by China, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. This involves complicated discussions of the origins of these concepts, their applicability in each case, as a term denoting a political and geographic area, a cultural sphere, or a state, throughout history. Without going into details, I will simply say that when I use the term “China” in this study, I use it as an equivalent of the term “Zhongguo” or “Central States” in its historical context, that is, it refers to, geographically, the area of the Central Plain, the present-day Henan, Shandong, southern Hebei, part of eastern Shanxi, and part of the Shaanxi Wei River basin, later also to include the lower Yangtze River Valley, and culturally, those states and vassals that were influenced by or subscribed to the Shang and Zhou cultural values and socioethical practices. In view of this evolving meaning of Zhongguo,

when it is used in the documents in the pre-Imperial period (c. before third century BCE), it is both a geopolitical and a cultural term that refers to the political and cultural situation of the said area. Needless to say, this concept is the product of a specific cultural and political elite of the time that was interested in exerting a certain political and cultural agenda. It is often not easy to distinguish and define at each instance the precise meaning of this term, especially since China as a “nation state” is a modern concept that came about only since the nineteenth century. China, moreover, is still a state in existence. Whether or how should we trace the roots and identify the modern state of China with the ancient Zhongguo, of course, is a wasp’s nest that I shall not poke in haste. For the moment, then, I will leave it just like that.

The use of the terms “Egypt” or “Mesopotamia,” similarly, should be defined in their respective historical contexts—that is, Pharaonic Egypt and Pre-Persian Assyria and Babylonia. Unlike China, as both of them no longer exist in the modern world, they could be defined as the cultural areas of the Nile River Valley, and “Mesopotamia—the land between the two rivers of Tigris and Euphrates.” My assumption is that the cultural developments of these areas are largely coherent, although not stagnant, despite millennia of political vicissitudes. More details are discussed in several chapters in this study.

With the above reference to the meaning of China, Egypt, and Mesopotamia, it seems that we are more or less taking a position that there were indeed these cultural entities out there that could be defined and recognized. Two qualifications, however, have to be spelled out. First is that we should recognize the ambiguity of the term “culture” and see it as a borderless conglomeration of ever changing value systems, religious beliefs, social ethics, and behavior patterns that are transmitted through human agency. It expands and moves when the agency moves and it changes and mutates when the agency absorbs new elements and abandons old, or even passing from one generation to the next. Secondly, because of its borderless state, a culture typically fades into its neighboring culture so that it would be difficult to draw a dividing line between one and the other. Archaeological cultures, often defined by pottery styles that gradually change from one area to the next but rarely with an abrupt division, typify this situation. Moreover, the fact that similar pottery styles could be used by quite different cultural groups further complicates the meaning of culture. Thus the idea of a foreigner, an agent who carries very different cultural values, and

so on, in contrast to one's own, can only exist or be formulated when one takes a position from the "center," that is, if the cultural sphere is large enough geographically and/or strong enough psychologically. As a result the degree of "foreignness" of a foreigner is only felt for one who upholds a position in relation to the center of the main cultural values. One may say that it is largely a creation of positioned cultural consciousness. As such, the foreigner is a relative concept: it all depends on who is viewing whom from which position. This understanding is no doubt intimately related to theories on ethnicity.

### *Ethnic Theories and Ancient History*

Greek writings about foreign people were often referred to as ancient "ethnography." It is often included in the modern discourses on race or ethnicity, a subject that has received intense attention from ethnologists, anthropologists, and sociologists as well as historians in the past few decades.<sup>18</sup> One of the theories that has received wide acceptance is that ethnic or national identities are subjective constructions that may not necessarily have anything to do with biological characteristics, and that race is a cultural construct with no fixed relationship to objective reality. This "subjective" view of the formation of ethnic identity, as expounded by F. Barth and others, has led many scholars to believe that what is most important in identifying an *ethnos* is not physical or material characteristics, but a shared value system and a commonly accepted descent or origin myth.<sup>19</sup> An ethnic group, according to this view, may be defined as a group of people who see themselves "as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or fictitious, and who are so regarded by others."<sup>20</sup> This view implies that the "common ancestry" of an ethnic group could have been fabricated out of any number of practical or emotional reasons. On the other hand, some scholars still have reservations about an exclusively subjective view of ethnic identity, and believe that objective biological and cultural traits are also important in forming ethnic identity.<sup>21</sup>

When applied to the study of modern societies, the subjective view of ethnic identity has been used to deconstruct long-lasting racial prejudice, particularly the white prejudice against people of color. The argument consists of two elements. In terms of biology, scientists researching the composition of human genes have tentatively concluded that the usual distinctions of race based on physical features such as skin color and hair may be misleading; that is, similar physical features

might belong to different lines of descent based on genetic traits, and vice versa. Seemingly different races, therefore, might be more intimately related genetically than those that look alike.<sup>22</sup> In terms of culture, moreover, it is doubtful if differences in the genetic traits could lead to cultural differences. Although people might be grouped together according to their genetic connectedness or physical features, this says nothing concerning their cultural affiliation. Since ethnicity is largely a subjective construction that has little or nothing to do with genes, no inherent or fixed ethnicity can be assumed.

Hence although the prejudice of the white against the coloreds is taken to the execution board, a number of scholars also took notice of racial prejudice among nonwhite peoples.<sup>23</sup> Most recently was Frank Dikötter, whose exposition of the discourse of race in modern China has excited considerable scholarly discussion.<sup>24</sup> Dikötter shows that racial prejudice was not a white people's privilege, that the Chinese had associated black skin color with racial types in a condescending way, and that they had imported black slaves long before the Europeans did.<sup>25</sup> To be fair, of course, one should point out that the use of black slaves in China is not comparable with the European situation either in the extent of the use of imported slave servants in society or in the degree of the use of slave labor in economic production. In any case, as far as we know, it was not an ancient phenomenon.

Not only the moderns are prone to racial prejudice, the ancient people were also capable of inflicting all sorts of prejudice upon foreigners. The use of the term βαρβαρος (barbarians) has often been cited as evidence of the condescending attitude of the Greeks toward foreigners, though perhaps not in the original sense of the word. According to recent scholarship, in most cases Greeks used the word βαρβαρος without a derogatory overtone but mainly as a reference to the cultural difference in the spoken language of the foreigners.<sup>26</sup> It was only after the Persian war that the Greek idea of barbarian changed from an earlier, more neutral sense of speakers of different languages, to represent a stereotypical and generalized image of an exotic, slavish, unintelligible, even morally corrupt barbarian. This has to do with the concomitant establishment of a "Greek identity" that did not really exist before the war. By defining the others—the barbarians, as the argument goes—"the Greeks" became a recognizable cultural entity.<sup>27</sup> As the example of Ephoros mentioned above shows, this process of constructing a cultural identity was a long and complicated process that should warn against any simplistic model of "ethnocentrism."

Similarly, the Egyptian term of “wretched Asiatics (*ḥmwt ḥsi*)”<sup>28</sup> or the Chinese *man-yi* (barbarians) carry certain pejorative meanings about the foreigners that were used to distinguish the “civilized us” from the “uncivilized them.” As noted above, however, one should be careful not to present a simple picture of any “group hostility” against foreigners without identifying the nature and intention of the sources and the cultural and sociopolitical background of the expressions that betray the so-called prejudice. People on the borderland or cultural periphery, for example, might have a very different view of the foreigners than those from the center of the social and political power structure. Since from their perspective the foreigners might actually be closer to them than the far away center of culture. Moreover, the drawing of boundaries between social and political groups was anything but the result of a unified conception of cultural identity of “us” versus “others.” Rather, political and factional interests prompted by the ambitions and intrigues of the leaders and elites often lay behind the formation of an official or public ideology that depicted foreigners or aliens as culturally backward and morally corrupt. In Herodotus’s report about his visit to Egypt, he noted that the Egyptians were unfriendly toward the Greeks. Was his report true? Or was he merely expressing his own prejudice? Was his praise of the wonders and wisdom of Egypt again mainly idealized accounts intended to reform his fellow countrymen who were his intended audience? It would be tremendously helpful if we could know the exact source of his information.<sup>29</sup> While all these could be interesting questions regarding the attitude of one Greek author toward a foreign country and its people, it would be equally interesting to learn what attitude the Egyptians had toward such foreigners as Herodotus. This falls into a larger framework that I intend to investigate. Since even the Greeks are latecomers compared to a number of ancient civilizations—for example, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China—an inquiry into the problem of cultural or ethnic consciousness in these civilizations might produce some useful information for our understanding of the general phenomenon of cultural and racial prejudice.

### *Choice of Subjects*

The aim of this study is to compare the attitudes toward foreigners and foreign cultures in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China. On a more general level, this is an investigation into the cultural consciousness of

three ancient civilizations. In ancient studies, it is customary to focus on the achievements of a particular civilization in art, history, religion, philosophy, and the like. It is also customary for scholars to approach their subjects employing a positivistic, straightforward method. In the field of Egyptology, for example, if one is interested in religious beliefs, one studies such religious texts as the *Pyramid Texts* and the *Book of the Dead*; if one wishes to know about ethical values and moral principles, one studies biographical texts and wisdom literature. Our understanding of the characteristics of Egyptian civilization is largely the accumulation of such studies. This is a legitimate method, and important and irreplaceable results have already been achieved. Yet at least one aspect of Egyptian civilization, or any civilization for that matter, cannot be satisfactorily illuminated by this method. This is the cultural consciousness, the self-perception, of a given people. It is often said that one of the most difficult tasks for a person is to know oneself. One cannot know oneself and establish one's own identity, or self-perception, though, without somehow knowing the others. The character of a person, furthermore, often manifests itself in his attitude toward others. The same may be said of a culture, as its character constructed by the above-mentioned positivistic method tends to represent only one side of the picture. We cannot unconditionally accept the picture that a given culture has drawn of itself—or as reconstructed by modern scholars—without comparing this self-portrait with its portrayal of other cultures. From a people's portraits of other cultures, as manifested in their knowledge of, attitudes toward, and discourse about foreigners and foreign cultures, regardless of whether these could reveal the true character of the cultures depicted, one could learn much about the people who produced such portraits. The concept of foreigner is a kind of portrait that could reveal the value and prejudice of the painter. A number of questions could be posed in this regard. For example, how did people perceive the foreigners? Were the foreigners seen as human beings just like themselves, or were they viewed as less than human? How did such perceptions come about? What were the consequences of such perceptions, or, how did people treat foreigners? Moreover, did people in the ancient world distinguish different groups of people on racial, or "biophysiological," grounds, or on cultural grounds? Were the "foreigners" really different culturally and racially, or was the difference artificially constructed as the result of prejudice and misunderstanding? What was the nature and sociocultural context of the sources that bear information concerning

foreigners? Were there different attitudes toward foreigners within a culture, in different times, and why? Was there any program or internal cultural mechanism that could somehow interact with foreigners and foreign culture in terms of acculturation or assimilation? By trying to answer these questions, this study purports to better understand how the ancient civilizations perceived other cultures. By comparing their attitudes toward other cultures, furthermore, we may begin to see the differences or similarities of the civilizations in question from a particular perspective, one that reveals their self-perceptions. Finally, when different perceptions of self are compared, certain fresh insight might be added to our understanding of each of these civilizations.

An obvious reason for our choice of China, Egypt, and Mesopotamia lies in a similarity shared by all three: each of them was the dominant culture, during their heyday, of their part of the world. As a result of their dominant positions, they had developed a mentality, each in their own way, that regarded themselves as culturally superior to their neighbors. To put it in a crude way, they all assumed a hegemonic role in relation to the “smaller” tribes or states around them. In ancient China, a clear cultural consciousness that regarded China as the center of the “civilized world” had gradually formed since the Western Zhou period from the eleventh century BCE onward. Previous studies on the formation of this cultural consciousness centered on problems such as the distinctions between Chinese and foreigners, the consolidation of the cultural identity of Zhongguo 中國 (the “middle kingdom” or “Central State”), or the origins of Zhongguo. Yet although many have discussed the origins of terms such as Zhongguo (middle kingdom, China) and Huaxia 華夏 (China), or the contrasting terms such as Rong 戎 and Di 狄, Man 蠻 and Yi 夷 (all “barbarian” tribes), the focus was primarily on the original meaning of the terms, the geographical area a certain term could have represented, or their ethnic associations.<sup>30</sup> What is missing in these studies is a comparative perspective that can provide insight into the “Chineseness” of this Chinese cultural consciousness. We need to know what was, if indeed there was, a particular trait in this cultural consciousness that was uniquely Chinese. On the other hand, scholars of Egypt and Mesopotamia have usually focused their attention on the explication and interpretation of the language, history, culture, art, and religion of these two civilizations. Among these studies the problems of ethnicity and interrelationship with surrounding areas have not gone unnoticed.<sup>31</sup> However, these works usually start from the assumption that comparison is meaningful

only where there were direct and tangible contacts between different peoples, such as the circulation of goods or the borrowing of ideas or artistic motifs. Thematic comparison, although touched in passing in a few works, has not yet received enough serious attention by scholars from these disciplines until recently.<sup>32</sup>

The above realizations more or less prompted this investigation, this attempt to break new ground in comparative studies. The point of departure is not to establish whether there were any "relations" or "connections" between these ancient civilizations, although Egypt and Mesopotamia certainly had, but whether their responses and attitudes toward other peoples could reveal, through comparison, significant findings concerning the nature of civilization.<sup>33</sup> In the course of research, it should be noted, I decided to leave out the areas of ancient India and Greece, the former ranked with China, Egypt, and Mesopotamia as the four great civilizations of the ancient world, the latter the well of inspiration of European civilization. I leave out India due to a lack of proper training on my part. A preliminary survey shows that in the long and complicated history of India, linguistic distinction and, to a lesser degree, physical distinction, were the major factors that determined the concept and attitude toward foreigners. Later complications of identifying language difference with culture, ritual status, and geographic difference constituted a very involved story.<sup>34</sup> I only hope that qualified Indologists would be provoked by my study and join the discussion. As for Greece, there seems no immediate need to reexamine the Greek material since there already have appeared a number of excellent studies on this subject. Instead, to show that we cannot ignore the problem either created or faced by the Greeks, and finally, to entice experts in Greek studies to take a look outside their usual territory, I believe I have invoked enough evidence in this chapter to show the important implications of the Greek view of barbarians for this study. Before we proceed further, however, it is necessary to discuss some methodological issues related to the comparative study of history.

### *About The Comparative Study of History*

Human knowledge is by and large the result of comparison. Through the comparative process one learns to distinguish and establish the nature and character of individual things. The study of history is no exception. We compare what comes before and what comes after a

certain timeline and try to establish the causal relationships between the two, which is usually called the historical method. Historical study, in this perspective, is essentially a form of comparative study. As one scholar points out, “proper comparison is the foundation of historical judgment.”<sup>35</sup> Yet often historians do not consider themselves as comparativists, nor do they pay particular attention to the extended meaning of comparison. They might have made comprehensive examination of their sources, which, consciously or not, must have involved certain comparative processes. As such, the comparison often operates within a self-contained cultural boundary, and all the references that are drawn upon are likely from a unified (ignoring the minor differences that inevitably exist in every culture) cultural milieu. The result of this is often a one-directional or one-dimensional understanding of history, either in the hows or in the whys that are offered as explanations of historical events. What is lacking is the effort to place the data in a comparative context that might generate different understandings and explanations. In other words, the idea of comparison in the study of history should not only be conducted within a certain historical tradition, but also in an intercultural context.

The comparative study of history, in a generally accepted sense, is to study different histories or cultural traditions and compare the course of these histories, in the hope that the comparison could help throw some light, otherwise less apparent, on the nature and evolution of individual societies. It can be useful as a way to elucidate the special features of the individual societies under scrutiny, because each may look different when compared with the other. It can also provide us with concrete material to establish social theories and generalizations. If, however, one accepts the necessity of comparative study, the logical next question would be: what to compare? The key, in my opinion, is to identify the relevant and significant issues that are common to more than one society. As Hodgson points out, “the process of comparison must be disciplined so that by choice of comparable units of comparison and by awareness of relevant context we can know what are the significant questions—what is and what is not a question.”<sup>36</sup>

The emphasis on comparing different histories, then, originates from a concern with the tendency of scholars who are preoccupied with the study of one historical tradition, who explain everything within the reference framework of that particular tradition, and think that that is enough for the understanding of that tradition. What needs to be emphasized, without belittling the value of the former approach,

is that in many cases human beings in different cultures face similar problems, and can come up with a variety of similar or different solutions. Through comparative studies, new ways of thinking about old problems could be suggested by calling attention to alternative approaches and solutions found in "other" traditions. As George M. Fredrickson, an eminent scholar of modern racism and nationalism, puts it, "historical comparison is not merely a method or procedure but also an antidote to the parochialism that may accompany a fixation on the history of one nation."<sup>37</sup> Fredrickson further distinguishes between "historicist" and "structuralist" approaches to comparative history. By "historicist" approach, he refers to a comparative approach that is aimed at better understanding of particular societies rather than the establishment or testing of universally applicable social theories. A "structuralist" approach, on the other hand, tends to be more congenial to historical sociologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, and political scientists in that it identifies a limited number of structural or institutional variables operating in a small number of historical situations and uses comparison to isolate the ones that account for similarities and differences.<sup>38</sup> These two approaches are different in their projected results: one focuses on the particularity of individual society, the other on arriving at a general theory of how societies function. Both are important for what they can achieve, although sometimes it might not be easy to make a clear-cut distinction between the two, for a deepened understanding of individual tradition is most likely going to affect the construction of a more comprehensive general theory. Thus an ideal comparative study is probably a study that combines elements of cultural contrast and structural analysis, as suggested by Fredrickson.

The historicist and structuralist approaches mentioned above may serve as the two ideal extremes of comparative studies. When conducting actual research, however, two practical modes of investigation could be suggested. A more usual way is the comparative perspective mode of study. This approach takes a certain cultural phenomenon in a particular historical tradition as its central concern. The understanding of this cultural phenomenon is based not only on the "native" material, but also on information gleaned from the manifestation of that particular cultural phenomenon in other societies or historical traditions. In this case, the researcher pursues one particular history or culture as his/her main object, but he/she utilizes more general or theoretical knowledge derived from a certain degree of familiarity with

the manifestation of that particular phenomenon in other cultures or societies. It is clear, therefore, that both historicist and structuralist approaches are employed here.

Another mode of comparative study involves a more comprehensive investigation of all the histories or cultural traditions to be compared. The researcher is expected to have equal control of the original sources, and have done in-depth study of the problem in each tradition, before making comparisons. There is no one target tradition against which other traditions are compared. Instead, both or all traditions are compared against each other, and are illuminated simultaneously by each other in hopes that a new understanding of each of the traditions can be achieved. This is different from the comparative perspective mode, in which the problems or issues of a major, target tradition, are illuminated by other traditions, while the understanding of those other traditions are not necessarily elevated to a new level. Consequently this comprehensive mode of comparison is more satisfying than the comparative perspective mode of study. The need for the latter, however, is still very pressing in the present stage of historical scholarship, because without it the chances are lessened for new perspectives to take form. Needless to say, the difficulty involved in the comprehensive comparative study is considerably higher for the obvious reason that the researcher is expected to be equally competent in two or even more fields. This is indeed an obstacle in the present state of scholarship and historical training. Yet this should not be an excuse if we expect progress in the future.

If we look back at humanistic scholarship in the last century, we see that the comparative study of history and culture is not a novel idea. Arnold Toynbee's monumental work *A Study of History* was a most ambitious attempt at comparative history. His approach and the result of his study placed him firmly in the camp of the structuralist approach, in that he proposed a biological model for the growth and decline of civilizations, a model that treated every civilization as a living organism in itself, subjected to the laws of biology.<sup>39</sup> In the 1940s, American anthropologist A. Kroeber published his *Configurations of Culture Growth*,<sup>40</sup> which was another attempt at finding configurations or structures of the growth of culture. Calls for research in comparative history were issued from time to time, and with the appearance of the journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History* in 1959, a venue for the enterprise gained a foothold in the scholarly community. Undeniably, however, most of the works in this direction are concentrated on

the modern to contemporary period. It is understandable that there is an obvious need for comparative studies in the modern period, because the different parts of the modern world since the sixteenth century are increasingly connected through the development of overseas traffic. The proliferation of interregional communications has made comparative studies between different regions not only relatively easier to formulate, but also more compelling. The models of comparison proposed by Hodgson, for example, are all based on interregional contacts of some sort.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, it seems that ancient historians have been less enthusiastic about comparison between cultures or regions that had no physical contact. Since their subjects seem to be tucked in the remote past far away from each other, comparison seems at first thought to be a fruitless waste of time. Besides, there is the real doubt about the validity of comparative study, since, according to this line of thought, each culture is unique and can only be understood on its own terms. One recent attempt at breaking this mode of thinking is a most ambitious and exciting project of comparative study by Bruce Trigger, which aims at investigating seven ancient civilizations, with Egypt as the center against which other civilizations are measured.<sup>42</sup> Trigger's goal was to "learn more about the factors that constrain human behavior by examining the similarities and differences in the ways in which a significant number of civilizations that had evolved independently, or almost independently, in different parts of the world had been structured and how each of them had functioned."<sup>43</sup> In order to conduct a rigorous comparison, Trigger declared that he tried to collect detailed information on every aspect of each civilization, so as to have a comprehensive understanding of the way of life in individual civilizations.<sup>44</sup> It seems, nevertheless, that his method is rooted in the comparative perspective mode, as he obviously makes Egypt the center of attention. As it is only a preliminary report; the final result of this project is still in the waiting. The drive for comparative study, however, is expected to have more resonance in the future.

Another recent attempt at comparative study of ancient civilization, this time by a classicist, G. E. R. Lloyd, with the collaboration of a sinologist, N. Sivin, tackles a broad range of problems related to some common themes in science and medicine that are present in both Greece and China by comparing their origins and developments and investigating their social and institutional frameworks.<sup>45</sup> Lloyd's experience is valuable: he warned us not to make generalizations easily, nor to make direct comparisons between individual concepts across

cultures as if they were addressed to the same issue, nor to assume that one concept could necessarily find its equivalent in another culture.<sup>46</sup> The context of the individual concepts and cultural phenomenon has to be established, and the nature of the evidence—the reason why it was preserved—has to be scrutinized before meaningful comparison can be conducted. Lloyd's approach to comparative study, obviously, does not assume that there was any contact between Greece and China. It was purely on the structural and conceptual aspects that comparison was conducted. Some recent studies in this direction are interestingly concentrating on the comparison of philosophical ideas.<sup>47</sup>

Lloyd's approach also differs from that of Toynbee's or Trigger's in an obvious and important aspect; that is, instead of comparing entire civilizations, he only concentrates on the theme of ancient science or scientific thought. This method implies that before the parts are clarified, the whole would not become clear. Just as to understand a great tradition one needs to have a clear idea of the individual parts of that tradition, a comparison between two cultures lacks firm foundation if comparisons between specific issues and phenomena have not been conducted.

A most recent study, somewhere between Trigger's and Lloyd's frameworks, is a comparative study of ancient civilizations focusing on the key concepts of order, legitimacy, and wealth,<sup>48</sup> initially posed by an article coauthored by John Baines and Norman Yoffee.<sup>49</sup> While this study is in essence a collection of essays by scholars studying different civilizations, their common focus on the concepts of order, legitimacy, and wealth as they manifested in different cultural contexts has to a certain extent revealed different patterns of interactions within each social structure. Although Baines and Yoffee's idea of a high culture as a dominant force that sustained the prosperity of civilization was not necessarily accepted by other scholars, the three analytical concepts proved to be useful tools for unlocking the dynamics of social discourse. As Baines and Yoffee states:

We do not, then, compare the two civilizations to enumerate similar traits or to establish the core principles of an abstraction, the "archaic state." Rather, through this controlled comparison in time, place, and historical contact, we seek to identify major axes of variation and to advance an important anthropological principle: by knowing what is institutionally and structurally dissimilar in one society judiciously compared with another, we can begin fresh investigations of the principles of organization and change in either society, or in both.

Our larger intention is to contribute to the set of comparisons of archaic states or early civilizations in general, to see what organizational principles are widely shared, what, if anything, is truly unique, and what general societal and transactional models can address data from a wide range of societies.<sup>50</sup>

While Trigger tries to compare the different civilizations in their entirety, Baines and Yoffee's agenda focuses on certain key concepts that point to a more universal principle concerning social organization and cultural interaction. The present study differs from both the approach of Trigger and that of Baines and Yoffee. I am not trying, as Trigger did, to conduct a comprehensive look at the entire civilization to identify the underlying "factors that constrain human behavior," nor, as Baines and Yoffee and others did, to discover the larger organizational principles that these ancient civilizations might have shared by analyzing the interactions of different social strata, the elite and the commoner. My only focus, somewhat similar to that of Llyod, is on a particular aspect of the ancient civilizations, that is, their cultural consciousness as manifested in their attitudes toward foreigners and foreign cultures. I will try to discover, describe, and then compare the attitudes toward foreigners and foreign cultures that each of the three civilizations in question possessed.

### *Structure, Scope, and Sources*

Having chosen the subject of cultural consciousness as the main concern, and having realized that the manifestation of cultural consciousness could at least partially be found in attitudes toward foreigners, it is necessary that we should identify the specific themes that could embody such manifestations. In chapter 2 I give some background for the development of cultural identity in terms of geography and language, so that the reader can, with the help of this background and the comparative perspective it brings about, follow the main themes developed in the later chapters. The comparative perspective is this: each civilization is unique, yet within this uniqueness are some common themes of development. The formation of cultural identity was the result of the workings of various factors such as geographical positions, linguistic affiliations, religious belief, socioeconomic developments, and lifestyles. On the other hand, race in a biological sense did not come into the picture in any of the civilizations, or so it seems. By exploring the common themes, one could gain a better appreciation of

the uniqueness and creativity of each of the civilizations in question, and of their commonality as part of the human experience.

Since cultural identity was to a large extent expressed through representations of self and others, it is necessary that we should look into the representations of foreigners in these ancient civilizations. In chapter 3, I discuss terminologies employed in these civilizations to designate self and others, and the graphic or textual representations of foreigners and foreign lands. The common tendency in all three civilizations seems to be an attitude that regarded the foreigners as culturally unsophisticated or even “barbaric” in contrast to their own culture. However, if one looks further into the sources, it is clear that beyond this basic attitude, foreigners could, under various circumstances, be perceived not only as either enemies or demons, but also as friends and allies, and sometimes even as subjects of appreciation. Chapter 4 outlines these different relations and attitudes toward the foreigners that are found in the three civilizations. It should be pointed out that the difference in attitudes might have been the reflection of the different sociopolitical background of the sources employed in our discussion. In particular, evidence for the appreciation of foreign culture seems to indicate the existence of a private and more balanced attitude, perhaps due to more experiences and contacts with the foreigners, that was often obscured by the official and consequently more belligerent and widely publicized attitude. To substantiate the above claim, it might be useful to investigate how the foreigners had actually been treated inside their host culture. In chapter 5, therefore, I discuss the social positions of foreigners, as well as the reception of foreign goods and languages. In Egyptian and Mesopotamian societies, as the evidence shows, the appearance of foreigners was not uncommon, although due to different causes. What can be suggested is that the necessity of daily life dictates that attitudes toward foreigners or resident aliens were much more practical and realistically benign when necessary, though perhaps never without certain prejudice. On the Chinese side, perhaps due to a different situation that involves an active attempt to assimilate foreigners, little evidence is preserved concerning the fate of foreigners in ancient China. To investigate this problem a step further, chapter 6 takes up the issue of cultural assimilation. As cultural assimilation usually occurs both ways when two different cultures encounter one another, this chapter not only discusses how the “barbarians” were transformed by our three “high” cultures, but also hints at how China, Egypt, and Mesopotamia were receptive to

foreign influences. This, finally, provides a crucial understanding that touches upon the central issue of the entire study: the attitude toward foreigners can be characterized by the willingness to assimilate and to be assimilated. On this point, the three ancient civilizations reveal to us different pictures that, when compared and analyzed, should give us some very subtle, but nevertheless deeper, understanding of the characteristics of each of them.

The scope of this study, to state it briefly, comprises the entire periods of ancient Mesopotamian history (to the Persian period, c. sixth century BCE), Pharaonic Egypt (to the beginning of the Ptolemaic period, c. fourth century BCE), and Early Imperial (early Han c. third century BCE) China. The approximate timeline was not actually the major concern. Rather the choice of the cutoff line was dictated by their internal development. For Egypt and Mesopotamia the choice should be evident: both civilizations came to an end politically, and entered into a new period of cultural metamorphosis. China after the unification of the Qin-Han empire also changed greatly politically as well as culturally, particularly with regard to the establishment and consolidation of a Sino-centric worldview. For this I end my discussion in the early Imperial period, although at certain places, especially chapter 6, the discussions might be carried down the timeline a little further. Of course there is always the question of comparability whenever one has decided to take a position. My position is simply that the developmental stages of the three civilizations, in the periods I delineated above, are roughly comparable. Whether this is indeed a sound decision, remains to be seen in the following chapters.

A special feature of this study is the great variety and uneven distribution of the sources that are used. Graphic evidence regarding foreigners abounds in Egypt but is sparse in Mesopotamia and almost nonexistent in China. Written evidence varies with genre: in Mesopotamia there are epic poetry, royal chronicle, a few private letters, and abundant texts of an economic nature. In Egypt we have personal biographies, official inscriptions, and literary texts. In China, besides oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, all of an official nature, there are historical works and philosophical treatises. The messages concerning attitudes toward foreigners contained in all these different sources are not of equal explanatory value and representative power, but they nonetheless should be treated with equal care.

A few words regarding the reading and interpretation of textual and iconographical evidence, moreover, are in order. As this study is

interested in the attitudes toward foreigners, the sources, whether textual or archaeological, when used, will mainly be assessed by the intention that the source reveals, not whether the statement in the text was a representation of any historical fact, or whether the graphic representations were depictions of historical events. The historical fact, for our purpose, is the attitudes and intentions expressed in the texts or revealed in the archaeological records. In the case of Mesopotamia, therefore, when the Gutians are described as the arch enemy of the people, what is interesting for us is how and why the Gutians could have become the archetype of evil foreigners, not what exactly they had done to the Mesopotamian people. Or, when we examine the Narmer palette, we are not concerned with whether the scenes on the palette represent any historical event—the unification of Egypt for example—but the intention of the scenes and the attitude toward foreigners and enemies they reveal. Again, in the case of China, when we encounter a passage in *Zuozhuan* stating that the Rong people are the descendants of the ancient Chinese sage kings, we are not concerned with whether the statement is true, but try to understand why such a statement was made at that particular time and place, and what it can tell us about the conception of the Chinese toward foreign peoples and cultures.

Another concern is the source and agency of the sources. In particular, there is a question concerning the nature of the confrontations between the sedentary and the nomadic peoples that the ancients recorded. How could we be sure whether the “vile enemy” was indeed a threat to the party that made the statement, and not vice versa? One cannot exclude the possibility that the “invasions” of foreigners recounted by the invaded party turned out to be a one-sided report of what really happened. It has been suggested long ago by a prominent scholar that in the interactions between sedentary and nomadic peoples, the sedentary people often claimed to be the victim of the confrontation, even though they were the victors and aggressors.<sup>51</sup> The fact that it was usually those who possessed the art of writing, and thus could say what they deemed appropriate and necessary, contributed to the impression of them being the victims. Similar situations might have existed in other cases. It is consequently very important to make an effort, even though difficult because of the lack of opposite views, to assess the nature of the confrontations by examining the origin and the agency of the sources, as well as the explicit or implicit purposes of the records. For the researcher, there

is always the problem of trying to decide whether to take the records about foreigners as faithful reflections of certain attitude, or casual and stereotypical reproductions of existing prejudice, or deliberate statements representing specific purpose.

Reflecting on the nature of the available evidence, one has to admit that all we have to use are only very limited in scope: we have the view of the elite, and that of the rulers. The story from the perspective of the great majority of people who might have direct encounter with the foreigners, if they did at all, has not been told. It is best to remember that at any given moment in history, our evidence can only serve as a very partial reminder of what might have been otherwise.

Last but not least is the methodological difficulty of comparative study. It is quite unsatisfactory when we can only reach the stage of describing “differences and similarities,” not that this is unimportant. Comparative study, as I imagined and stated above, should allow us to have new understandings of the subjects that are otherwise difficult to obtain. Indeed, without this hope for new understandings, there is little incentive for one to engage in comparative study, given the inevitable and often insurmountable limitations of one person’s knowledge and training, as Baines and Yoffee warned:

[Few] Egyptologists and Assyriologists have the skills to assess all the periods in their particular culture, let alone two cultures. Moreover, few scholars of these civilizations are inclined to be comparativists, and many even regard the principle of comparison as violating the “conceptual autonomy” of their area of study—its unique developmental trajectory and historical character.<sup>52</sup>

My excuse in launching this study lies in the belief that, without trying, we would never know whether comparative study of history in its full sense is possible at all. How one could achieve new understanding through comparative study, on the other hand, seems to be more a matter of individual talent and insight than the mere fact that one is comparing. Obviously it will be impossible in this study to address all the questions raised above in a satisfactory fashion, but I hope what follows at least makes the point that comparative study can be useful, and that some new understandings of the three civilizations can be reached.