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PERIODIZATION AND "THE MEDIEVAL GLOBE": A CONVERSATION

KATHLEEN DAVIS and MICHAEL PUETT

THE IDEA FOR this conversation emerged out of "The Medieval Globe: Communication, Connectivity, and Exchange," a conference held at the University of Illinois in April of 2012. Its authors represent different scholarly disciplines and fields of study, and yet both presented papers that engaged with very similar issues—and that touched off a series of broader discussions among all conference participants. The editors of The Medieval Globe *decided that it would be beneficial to capture the dynamics of their exchange in the form of a dialogue.*

Kathleen Davis For a scholar like myself who has been dedicated to exposing the mechanisms, logic, and effects of medieval/modern periodization, a project titled *The Medieval Globe* suggests great potential but at the same time raises some serious concerns. Most obviously, the Middle Ages is a European historiographical category. Globalizing it can thus have the effect of fitting the entire world into Europe's self-centered narrative of historical time. Moreover, the Middle Ages was constituted as exclusively European—indeed, as specifically *western* European—a process that to an important extent enabled the idea of Europe as an internally unified entity, and at the same time had the effect of excluding eastern European and non-European areas from the ancient-medieval-modern progression. Thus certain fundamental histories—such as those of politics, sovereignty, law, and philosophy—were written as moving from Athens to Rome and thence to florescence in certain power centers of Christian Europe, despite the very obvious fact that for most of what we call the Middle Ages, the engines of scholarship, not to mention economics and world trade, were in the east and south. This ancient-medieval-modern progression, tailored as it is to a narrative of western Europe, and balanced on the fulcrum of the Middle Ages, remains crucial to the exclusionary force of the "modern" today.

Had the narrative of the Middle Ages *merely* been a matter of self-centered historiography, its genesis might not pose such a problem. After all, histories are continually revised, and many narrowly conceived ideas ultimately lend themselves well to expansion or exportation. But the period concept of the Middle Ages was never merely historiographical, and it was *not* the brainchild of "Renaissance" humanists; rather, it came into being with and through colonialism, intertwined

with nationalism, primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is by now well understood that European colonizers attributed "medieval" characteristics to colonized and subjugated peoples and thus denied them coeval status—that is, equal standing as human beings, whether in regard to law, trade, the capacity for self-rule, and so forth. Less well understood, and a point I consistently try to emphasize, is that the idea of a superstitious, religious, feudal, backward, irrational, static Middle Ages did not preexist the colonial subject upon which it became mapped. To the contrary, the temporalized characteristics attributed to the Middle Ages emerged from and advanced the process of identifying and ruling colonized subjects. At the same time, this process helped to underwrite European nationalist histories, as well as the entire edifice of Orientalism. The *becoming medieval* of the centuries apportioned to the Middle Ages, in other words, was a regulative process providing ideological support for practices with material, economic, political, and institutional effects—such as the extraction of wealth, environmental degradation, and destruction of social systems in conquered territories: effects that are fully intertwined with the conditions of globalization today.[1] The complex temporality of these effects cannot be accounted for within the concept of a linear unfolding of periodized historical time. Indeed, the identification of the Middle Ages as a global era preceding 1500 may have the unintended effect of not only masking crucial aspects of this history but also corroborating its narrative logic.

We are thus faced, it seems to me, with a double valence. On the one hand, we have the obvious concern that the category of "the medieval globe" organizes history according to a European rubric, leaving in place the problem of periodization and the suggestion of linear movement from medieval to modern—a temporal debacle that has long been a concern for many cultures and a central sticking point for postcolonial theory. Medievalists of course have long acknowledged this problem and have worked to ameliorate or complicate its temporal implications. Nonetheless, retaining the temporal frame of the medieval, and reconfiguring it as a global category of time, runs the risk of reconfirming the terms of the colonial, Orientalist history through which it emerged, of homogenizing the plural temporalities of global cultures, and of effacing the material effects of the *becoming* of the Middle Ages and its relationship to conditions of globalization.

On the other hand, we can certainly say that the idea of a "medieval globe" pushes against many of the major claims of colonial and nationalist history, correcting the record, making all cultures coeval, and insisting upon broad, non-Eurocentric study of the time called the Middle Ages. Medievalists have begun

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1 For further discussion, see Davis, "Theory in Time."

to investigate fine details of this history and have been putting in place the scholarship necessary for showing that the time we call the Middle Ages was global all along—not in the sense of the European imperial narrative, but in the sense of cultural connections, interdependencies, and exchange, as well as complex power relations. This new journal fosters just such a history: "*The Medieval Globe* advances a new theory and praxis of medieval studies by bringing into view phenomena that have been rendered practically or conceptually invisible by anachronistic boundaries, categories, and expectations." Such a history tends to undo the foundational narratives of European nations as well as gives space to hitherto slighted histories, and—even though it works on a periodized basis—it may even disrupt some of the premises of medieval/modern periodization. I have argued that this periodization is fundamental to dominant modes of sovereignty, and if that is correct, then "the medieval globe" might begin to imagine ways to unravel such sovereignty. If these historical stakes are explicitly addressed, it might also help to undermine the hegemony of the "modern," which—despite decades of postcolonial critique—remains a sticking point for revisionary historical analysis.

Ironically, however, such an unraveling is a principal desideratum of global capital. In this regard I often think of Saskia Sassen's point: that to be successful, globalization must engage the institutional architecture of the national state, compared to which global-level institutions and processes are relatively underdeveloped. Much of what we call globalization, she suggests, takes place within a national framework and "consists of an enormous variety of micro-processes that begin to de-nationalize what had been constructed as national—whether politics, capital, political subjectivities, urban spaces, temporal frames, or any other of a variety of dynamics and domains."[2] According to this scenario, globalization *needs* the de-nationalizing of that temporal frame we call the Middle Ages, the foundational past that constituted both the history and characteristics of European nations and peoples, as well as their superior, advanced relation to the people they colonized. Unpicking the attachments of a foundational Middle Ages to the national histories of northwestern Europe, and reconfiguring them as global, stretched across trade routes, enmeshed economies, and intercultural experience, is precisely what is necessary for globalization—particularly its economic forms—to have a legitimizing past. (We might think, for example, of the aggrandizement by global corporations of powers formerly exercised by sovereign states.) We medievalists, situated within the corporate university and responsive

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2 Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights*, 1.

to its call for global studies, seem poised to deliver such a past, and we would do well, I think, to keep the inherent dangers of this larger context in mind.

I have many questions about the relevance of these issues from the vantage of Chinese historiography and politics. Does Chinese experience with the imperial and colonizing efforts of European states confirm or complicate the "colonial" history of periodization that I have described? What do contemporary Chinese historians consider the stakes of periodization, and is this an area of contention, particularly with regard to globality?

Michael Puett If the term "medieval" was created in the West as a foil against which the "modern" could be seen as arising, these terms have been all the more insidious when applied to Chinese history. When the ancient-medieval-modern narrative began being applied to China by Western scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concern was precisely to ask why China had failed to emerge into "the modern era" as the West had. China was seen as having had a continued "medieval" period, defined by a cyclical (as opposed to progressive) view of time and a seemingly endless series of dynasties, with each dynasty simply recreating the ideas and institutions of the preceding dynasty. Under such a narrative, the impact of the West broke this cyclical history and finally brought about a beginning of modernity.

More recent historians in China, Japan, and the West have, of course, rejected such a reading. Intriguingly, however, this has resulted not so much in a rejection of the ancient-medieval-modern narrative but rather in a reconfiguration of the application of the terms to Chinese history. The goal has often been to emphasize that China had its own indigenous beginning of modernity prior to the Western impact. This by definition has entailed applying the term "modern" to periods prior to the nineteenth century, but it has often entailed as well a reconfiguration of the term "medieval." A brief overview of the more recent ways in which the terms "ancient," "medieval," and "modern" have been applied to Chinese history may be helpful.

First, the "ancient" period of Chinese history—usually referred to by scholars as the "early" period. For the study of early China, scholars have often emphasized the overall parallels with Western history. Thus, the Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國) period (475–221 BCE) has often been compared with classical Greece—a period of political disunity in which philosophical debates flourished. The Han 漢 dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) has similarly often been compared with the Roman Empire—a period when eastern Eurasia came to be dominated by a single major empire just as western Eurasia was. Within these comparisons, scholars may emphasize differences (for example, the different ways the philosophical traditions developed, etc.), but the overall comparability of ancient Greece and Warring States China, as well as the Roman and Han empires, tends to be assumed.

The early medieval period is then usually seen as having begun with the fall of the Han dynasty, often portrayed as paralleling "the fall" of the Roman Empire. The ensuing period of division in China has thus often been seen as comparable to "the Dark Ages" in Europe. For the rest of this "medieval" period, however, a contrast between Europe and China is usually emphasized. The High Middle Ages is usually identified with the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907). The contrast that is commonly drawn here holds that the creation of the Tang dynasty represents the re-emergence of an empire very comparable to the Han, whereas, according to this narrative, Europe never saw the re-emergence of an empire like the Roman Empire. Thus, the common questions posed for this period from a comparative perspective are why China witnessed the reunification of the empire and why Europe did not, and what implications these developments had for the histories of the respective areas.

The next set of debates then focus on when the modern period began in China. Naitō Konan (1866–1934) argues that the shift from the medieval to the modern period began with the transition from the Tang to the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279). More recently, a number of historians have tried to argue that "early modern China" began much later, during the period from 1500 to 1800. Either way, however, one of the implications is that "modernity," or at least the beginnings of modernity, emerged indigenously in China, prior to the nineteenth-century Western impact.

In contrast to such narratives, a number of recent scholars have tried to argue that China should be studied without any reference to the ancient-medieval-modern narrative derived from studies of western Europe. But this in turn has led to a tendency to reject comparisons with European history altogether. It also raises the question of what form of periodization to utilize instead. An obvious periodization would be the dynastic cycle model, but this was (contrary to the claims of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western scholars) only one of many indigenous ways to conceptualize history in China. In some contexts it can be a useful form of periodization. In other contexts it is not.

We will return to some of the complexities of these issues below. But here I would simply like to argue that the term "modern" be dropped altogether as an analytical tool to understand any aspect of history. The term can of course be employed when people claim themselves to be "modern," but it should not ever be used as an analytical category.[3]

But if we refuse the term "modern," then what about "medieval?" I would in general oppose the term "medieval" precisely because it would seem to have such

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3 See Symes, "When We Talk about Modernity."

little meaning outside of a contrast with "modernity." But the idea of this journal to redefine the term in a spatial and comparative way strikes me as potentially quite powerful.

The strength that a notion of a "medieval globe" might have is that it maintains a comparative focus, but the point of the comparison is not the teleological movement toward modernity but rather a synchronic comparison of cultures across the world over a defined chronological period. The comparative focus thus shifts away from asking when and why a given culture did or did not start making the shift toward modernity and instead asks what was going on at a given period throughout the globe. Instead of being rejected, the term "medieval" is, on the contrary, resuscitated and given a new comparative meaning by being placed in a spatially comparative lens. As long as we refuse the term "modern," and use "medieval" only in this global sense—as a resuscitated theoretical term that will allow us to look at larger global patterns during a particular period of history—it can be potentially very useful.

Kathleen Davis I am in full agreement that the term "modern" should be dropped altogether as an analytical tool to understand any aspect of history. Of course, this would be a large order indeed. The slippage between acknowledging *claims* to be "modern" and assuming *ontological status* for this "modern" has thoroughly infiltrated historiography, literary analysis, and theories of history. And, because claims to be "modern" simultaneously define a past that is left behind, this slippage likewise tends to grant ontological status to this fabricated past, no matter how absurd or cartoonish it is. As an example, we can take the description by Reinhart Koselleck (an extremely influential theorist of temporality and modernity) of the Middle Ages as locked in stasis and lacking any meaningful sense of historical change: operating under the sign of eternity, it "remains trapped within a temporal structure that can be understood as static movement." "*Sub specie aeternitatis*," he claims, "nothing novel can emerge."[4] It is precisely the cartoonish nature of this static "Middle Ages," in fact, that has made it transferable to areas well beyond Europe, such as China. Thus the "foil" that you mention continues to circulate in well-meaning and otherwise sophisticated analyses of issues as disparate as nationalism, colonialism, international relations, secularism, gender politics, and so forth.

Indeed, the invisibility of this slippage is often crucial to arguments about these issues, entrenched as they are within disciplines established and institutionalized in the nineteenth century, and broadly expanded in the twentieth. That is to

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4 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 17 and 16 (respectively).

say, the foundations of these disciplines were fully intertwined with the national and colonial projects that co-generated the Middle Ages and the colonial subject.

The insidious nature of applying the ancient-medieval-modern narrative to China thus results not merely from the suggestion that China failed to emerge into the modern era on its own, but also from the history of domination already inherent within the term "Middle Ages" and naturalized, so to speak, in the disciplines applied to China by Western scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Self-critique within these disciplines has been vigorous and productive, but it rarely even hints at the fundamental absence at their core: that is, an *un*temporalized Middle Ages from which historical consciousness and all things modern can emerge. In fact, this temporal absence is often an enabling assumption of such critique. One example (by now notorious among medievalists) is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, which builds its argument regarding the emergence of nationalism upon utterly absurd claims about the "Middle Ages." Anderson is an easy target, but the contrast between the absurdity of his claims and the continuing popularity of his book is instructive.

Today, the intensifying efforts to find an "early modern" period beyond Europe attest to the enduring power of medieval/modern periodization with respect to political and economic dominance. Naitō Konan clearly recognized the stakes involved when, in the early twentieth century, he found an early beginning of the modern for China in the transition from the Tang to the Song dynasty. Significantly, although the category "early modern" emerged in the mid-twentieth century and focused on "early modern Europe," its use escalated with the pace of decolonization. The endeavor to identify an early modern period is currently flourishing not only with respect to China but throughout the "non-West," particularly South Asia. To its credit, one goal of this endeavor is the kind of synchronic comparison of cultures across the world that you recognize as a potential strength of the notion of a "medieval globe." Yet, as you intimate and I would like to underscore, "early modern" most certainly does anticipate "the shift toward modernity." Arguments for an early modern period thus privilege the "modern" as the central category of historical analysis. Even if the point is to claim recognition for the contributions (and perhaps the precedence) of *other* cultures to recent global history, this endeavor ultimately reinscribes the teleology as well as the assumptions, priorities, and blind spots of what passes as "modernity."

Nonetheless, this "early modern" has been notoriously difficult to define. There is good reason for this difficulty, and in order to address it I would like to return to my point above that the period-concept of the Middle Ages was *not* the brainchild of Renaissance humanists. To the contrary, the narrative that the Renaissance created the Middle Ages is an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century story that displaces the work of its own colonial imaginary, settling it upon the trumped-up

rupture of the Renaissance. The time *between* the work of this displacement and this purported rupture—that is, roughly the fifteenth to the mid-eighteenth century—is what now goes under the label "early modern." Ironically, then, endeavors to identify empirical evidence for an early modern period in order to write more global, non-Eurocentric histories rest upon a fundamentally constitutive element of the European narrative even as they efface the evidence of its contradictions.

Michael Puett I fully agree that removing "modernity" from our conceptual models is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. Almost all of our theories and disciplines take the notion of modernity for granted. Rejecting such a concept will involve a fundamental rethinking of most of our theoretical frameworks.

One of the ways to begin such a rethinking is to look at *emic* theories from around the world. Such *emic* theories will open up new ways of thinking about the self, about history, about forms of social and political organization. But sometimes it will work the other way as well. If this attempt to take *emic* theories seriously will often direct us to new ways of thinking, it can also lead us to see the cultural specificity of many of the theories we assume to be universally valid, by revealing the highly specific contexts in which those same theories have appeared at various times in history. Many of the claims that we typically associate with the modern period have, we will see, surfaced repeatedly in history.

I mention this as an introduction to a discussion of *emic* terminologies concerning historical change in China. We mentioned above the attempts by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western historians to place Chinese history into an ancient-medieval-modern framework. But what types of *emic* periodization existed among elites in the areas that would ultimately become China?

It is often said that, in China, one finds an assumption of time as cyclical. As noted above, this is precisely the notion of time that is seen in so many nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories as having been a widespread assumption in China, and from which "modernity" is seen as having broken. But a cyclical notion of time was only one of many understandings of temporality in China. It was certainly never an assumption. It was, rather, a view that became important at certain moments, at the state level. A brief history of the notion will be worthwhile.

The cyclical view of history was, at least in our extant records, first articulated in the early Zhou dynasty (roughly, the mid-eleventh century BCE). The Zhou claimed that their defeat of the earlier Shang dynasty was part of a larger dynastic cycle called the Mandate of Heaven (Tianming 天命). Heaven was portrayed as a moral deity that would reward good rulership and punish bad rulership. More specifically, Heaven would grant the mandate to rule to someone morally worthy. The mandate would then be handed down within the same lineage until the rulers ceased to be moral. At that point, Heaven would withdraw the mandate from the

lineage and hand it to a worthy person from another lineage, who would start a new dynasty. Under such a vision, history thus consisted of a succession of dynasties, with each dynasty beginning with a virtuous ruler and ending with a bad ruler.

In the case at hand, the last Shang ruler had been unvirtuous; Heaven thus withdrew the mandate from the Shang and bestowed it upon the Zhou. The articulations of this view appeared in the Zhou chapters of the *Book of Documents* (Shangshu 尚書), a work later thought to have been edited by Confucius. The Mandate of Heaven theory thus came to be associated with the early dynasties and with Confucius.

A very different conception of time appeared with the rise of the early empires. When the Qin created the first empire on the north China plain in 221 BCE, the First Emperor of the Qin famously did not claim to be simply creating a new dynasty—one that would presumably also eventually decline and be replaced in turn. The First Emperor, on the contrary, claimed to be bringing the dynastic cycle to an end and to instead be creating an enduring empire—one that would last for ten thousand generations. Although the Qin fell soon thereafter, the vision of creating an enduring empire most certainly did not. Similar visions continued in the ensuing Han dynasty, which also claimed to be creating an enduring empire that would break the dynastic cycle of the Bronze Age kingdoms.

A third—albeit related—view should be mentioned as well, for it too held great significance throughout later Chinese history. In the second century of the Common Era, a number of millenarian movements began to emerge. One of the most influential of these was the Celestial Masters (Tianshi 天師). The Celestial Masters held that the cosmos was created by a good deity, but that human errors had slowly brought the cosmos to the point of destruction. That deity had now taken the form of a human under the name of Laozi, in order to give further revelations. Those who followed the teachings of Laozi would survive the coming apocalypse and become the seed people for humanity in the new cosmos to come. Such an eschatological vision of time became a recurrent one in the millenarian movements that have sporadically appeared throughout Chinese history.

All three of these visions of time—the dynastic cycle model, the model of enduring empire, and the millenarian vision—became crucial throughout the middle period of Chinese history (roughly 400–1400). But it is the interrelationship between the three that is of particular interest to us. The latter two visions—the model of an enduring empire and the millenarian vision—almost perfectly parallel the temporal claims of our notion of modernity. In the first case, the explicit claim of the First Emperor was that he had broken from an earlier, cyclical past and ushered in a new era of radical innovation. Mao was, in this sense, quite correct when, in proclaiming that he was bringing to an end the world of traditional China and introducing modernity, he compared himself to the First Emperor. Simi-

larly, the millenarian visions rested upon an equally strong claim of breaking from an earlier order that held down humanity and instituting a new era of freedom and possibility.

In both of these cases, one finds a vision of time that closely parallels the temporal claims of modernity, and one that was defined against a cyclical vision that was claimed (incorrectly) to have been an overturned assumption. In short, our definition of a modernity breaking from an earlier world in which time was defined as cyclical, and in which humanity was held down by a restrictive world-view, is hardly new or uniquely Western. This helps to underline the point that using terms like "modernity" to define our analyses is inherently flawed. Ultimately, we may want to consider using terms like "imperial visions of time" and "salvationist" visions of time, thus placing our own so-called "modern" visions in comparison with related visions that have repeatedly played out throughout human history.

Kathleen Davis It is fascinating to think of the temporal models you discuss with respect to Europe, particularly when we consider the role that all three of these models have played in the generation of medieval/modern periodization. Not only, as you mention, did European historiography claim that modern Europe had left cyclical history behind, labeling it "Oriental," but so-called "modern" histories also claim to be secular, and thus to leave eschatology behind. However, the narrative that Europe put these temporalities in its past is simply a claim of periodization itself; and like all such claims, its sorting process foregrounds certain elements and obscures others. As often noted, for example, eschatology is at the heart of "progress" as well as the concept of the suppression of the medieval by the modern. Many aspects of political temporality follow the cyclical logic that you describe. Most to the point, perhaps, is the fear that American "empire"—like the Roman Empire before it—is now waning, particularly in the face of "China rising." Ironically, such narratives not only follow the cyclical model but also continue the venerable European tradition of *translatio imperii*—the narrative that a legitimate claim to empire was transferred from Greece, to Rome, to the power centers of western Europe.

What seems most significant to me, therefore, is the degree to which the bond between political sovereignty and the periodization of history applies to the various histories we've discussed. All of the temporalities that you've described are linked to political rule, just as the recent efforts to rewrite Chinese periodization focus on dynastic patterns. These examples bring into stark relief, I believe, the arguments I make above regarding medieval/modern periodization. Put bluntly, periodizations such as these are fundamentally and always about sovereignty. They only come to seem "real" when they are deeply embedded in historiography and related disciplines.

Your suggestion that we may want to consider using nonlinear terms like "imperial visions of time" and "salvationist" visions of time thus seems immensely promising to me, not least because it offers the potential to recognize *coexisting* temporalities. Because periodization is both exclusionary and aligned with power, its exclusions have been just as repressive of minority histories and visions of temporality within Europe as they have been beyond Europe. Indeed, the identity of "Europe" (and now also "the West") has been constituted through the exclusion both of what lies "outside" its borders and what is *other* within these borders. Scholars have been working hard, of course, to open the archive and retrieve the histories of repressed minorities or understudied regions, but these efforts have been hampered by the fundamental role of medieval/modern periodization within their disciplines. If we were to place this periodization within a long view that exposes its parochialism and its banality, and at the same time stay focused on the possibility of coexisting temporalities, we might be able to think global history in a way that does not simply serve the interests of current, "globalizing" powers. *The Medieval Globe* can certainly contribute to such a task.

We are often told that periodization is useful, even necessary to the very writing of history. This is so only to the degree that history is related to institutionalized power and the conceptions of historical time that support it. The challenge, then, is to think the idea of "the medieval globe" in a way that, as you suggest, resuscitates "medieval" as a theoretical term divorced from teleology and the spectre of an inevitable modernity. Such a "medieval" might bring to visibility multiple, coexisting conceptions of temporality that altogether defy attempts to plot them on a linear trajectory.

Michael Puett I very much agree with your emphasis on the importance of sovereignty for this forging of a medieval-modern temporality—whether that temporality is to be located in the past few centuries of European history or in earlier centuries in China. Once the medieval-modern teleology has been exposed as being simply a more recent instantiation of a very old pattern, the challenge is indeed to find ways to undertake historical analyses without falling into such a standard (and now near-dominant) way of thinking. One of the key goals for a "medieval globe" will therefore be, as you argue, to allow for a comparative focus on the forms of temporality that were at play during this period of history without resorting to the dangerous teleologies we have noted.

And let me also underscore your earlier point about the potential dangers of how we explore global networks of trade—a key component of the "early modern" paradigm. Even if finally removed from a claim of "early modernity"—finally removed, in other words, from a claim that these global networks of trade were breaking down earlier, more insular societies and moving us toward a modern,

globalized world—we need to be careful that we are not implicitly celebrating these networks for precisely this very reason. In other words, we risk falling into the danger of the "early modernity" paradigm even if we have dropped the term. And we need, as you argued powerfully, to be self-conscious that the current celebration of networks of trade is not implicitly playing into and thus helping to legitimate the current celebrations of globalization in neo-liberal economics.

But, having mentioned these dangers, let me again return to the positive aspects. Rescuing the term "medieval," freeing it from its status as that which came before and had to be broken from in order for modernity to begin, and placing it within a global context allows for the possibility of undertaking truly comparative and perhaps even connective work for a period that has received relatively little such attention. For the study of China, it would be wonderful to have studies that would be fully comparative and yet not based upon questions of when China did or did not start becoming modern.

Watching the field of global medieval studies develop will be tremendously exciting. I have no doubt that this period—and thus world history in general—will look very different once it has been placed in a comparative context and has been rescued from its definition as that which preceded modernity.

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Abstract The period categories "medieval" and "modern" emerged with—and have long served to define and legitimate—the projects of western European imperialism and colonialism. The idea of "the medieval globe" is therefore double edged. On the one hand, it runs the risk of reconfirming the terms of the colonial, Orientalist history through which the "medieval" emerged, thus homogenizing the plural temporalities of global cultures and effacing the material effects of the *becoming* of the Middle Ages and its relationship to conditions of globalization. On the other hand, "the medieval globe" brings to bear a comparative focus that does not ask when and why a given culture did or did not start making the shift toward modernity, but rather asks what was going on at a given period throughout the globe. Such a history might undo the foundational narratives of European nations as well as give space to hitherto slighted histories. This conversation approaches the complexities of this problem from two perspectives: that of a scholar in European studies and a scholar in Chinese studies.