

Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture. By Anthony J. Barbieri-Low. Seattle, WA and London: University of Washington Press, 2021. Pp. xiv + 316. \$50.00.

Anthony Barbieri-Low's¹ *Ancient Egypt and Early China* (hereafter "book" or "monograph") is a rare breed and as such a refreshing read. In the still burgeoning field of comparative studies, it is the first monograph that is solely devoted to ancient Egypt and China. As the author illustrates (pp. 11–12; for his survey of comparisons between ancient Greece, Rome, and China, see pp. 8–11), some scholars have compared both cultures, but did so in monographs that also involved comparisons with other cultures or shorter treatments. In general, the book under review is a brave endeavour. Comparative studies have become increasingly popular in the past two decades, but it appears that they have yet to be widely accepted as legitimate approaches to the study of ancient societies.² On numerous occasions, I have encountered junior as well as senior scholars, who told me that they do not see any merits in this kind of research. I was a sceptic myself for a long time. I simply could not recognize any advantage in juxtaposing early China with other societies. How could anything possibly compare to something so unique?

I am most grateful to the Egyptologists Patrizia Heindl, Carl Elkins, and Rune Nyord, as well as Clara Luhn, Alexander Campos Aran (both Sinologists), Charles Sanft (early China historian), and Yitzchak Jaffe (anthropological archaeologist of early China) for their helpful comments on this review. Moreover, thank Cheng Lai Kuen for her keen eye in editing this review. Naturally, any remaining mistakes or lingering ambiguities are my own responsibility.

¹ Anthony Barbieri-Low is a historian of early China. He teaches at the Department of History at University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). His faculty profile indicates that he has dropped the "Low" from his last name and now goes by Anthony Barbieri. In what follows, I will, thus, refer to him either as "author" or "Barbieri." See <https://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/anthony-barbieri/> (last accessed on 10 January 2022).

² The author identifies the book as a work of comparative history (esp. pp. 5–8), but I prefer to refer more broadly to "comparative studies" and "comparative research" because there also has been (mostly) excellent progress in comparative scholarship in other research areas in recent years. See, for instance, Alexander Beecroft, *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China: Patterns of Literary Circulation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Yiqun Zhou, *Festivals, Feasts, and Gender Relations in Ancient China and Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Having been involved in several comparative projects, I now see things quite differently. Working with comparisons made me incredibly uncomfortable at first, but it has slowly taught me to look beyond the limitations of ideologically tinged transmitted literature and the equally biased material culture of early China. I have come to appreciate the fact that comparisons force us to search for answers about what motivated people in early and early medieval Chinese societies on a deeper level. If done thoroughly, comparative research—and social theories, for that matter—are not fads of bored scholars who look for something new and “interesting.”³ On the contrary, they open doors to far-reaching insights and, more importantly, illustrate that China was not unique. Many societies developed along similar lines and early Chinese societies often demonstrates comparable patterns. Take, for instance, the pivotal roles that violence and ritual played in the formation and consolidation of early complex states.⁴

Perhaps, Barbieri and other readers might object that I push (comparative) evidence too far with this claim. I sympathize with the author’s assessment that it is crucial to avoid “the hazard of ‘universalism’” because it “assumes that there is a universal human nature that operates at all times and in all places, leading all human societies along a similar trajectory” (p. 7).⁵ Yet, that does not mean that we ought to forego general conclusions altogether. We can avert the pitfalls of universalism by not turning certain observations into default answers for every culture and time. Even the fact that *some* cultures clearly followed similar trajectories⁶ absolutely does not warrant assertions that *all* cultures did. Instead, we need to either thoroughly study specific phenomena in any given society ourselves or rely on such thorough studies, and then check whether other societies may have developed along comparable lines on a case-by-case basis. Like all (social) theories, any specific research result that might be valid beyond its immediate context (i.e.,

³ The notion that some issue might be interesting is inherently subjective to begin with, hence the “scare quotes.”

⁴ See, for instance, the comparative volume edited by Roderick Campbell, *Violence and Civilization: Studies of Social Violence in History and Prehistory* (Oxford and Oakville: Oxbow Books, 2014). On the significance of ritual, see, for instance, the classic study by Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁵ Barbieri rightly also cautioned against determinist, essentialist, and exceptionalist interpretations in comparative history (p. 7). I would go even further and claim that all four kinds of arguments have no place in scholarship whatsoever. Of course, my above arguments concerning universalism are also valid for determinist, essentialist, and exceptionalist views of historical phenomena.

⁶ See n. 4, above.

a hypothesis) needs to be tested against the actual evidence one intends to analyse. That is to say, the issue at hand primarily concerns the way in which scholarship receives and processes research results and not the results themselves. How these might be perceived is out of our hands, but that is not enough reason to skirt conclusions that might have larger implications.

Thus, focusing on how something happened does nothing more than outline the often culturally specific traits of certain social phenomena. In turn, concentrating on why things occurred in certain ways will explain the reasons why they happened in the first place. Some readers might frown upon my seemingly trite distinction between description and analysis. My point, however, is to emphatically support Barbieri's principal intention. He aims to use comparisons between New Kingdom Egypt (1548–1086 B.C.E.) and Western Han China (206 B.C.E.–9 C.E.; hereafter "Egypt" and "China") in order "to move beyond description toward causal explanations of historical phenomena, uncovering the 'robust processes' that led to particular outcomes in multiple places and times" (p. 5). Following Theda Skocpol's example,⁷ he pursues "macro-causal analys[e]s" so as to highlight and "isolate causal variables that explain particular historical outcomes" (p. 6). For that, he deserves nothing but praise.

Of course, a general distrust in the validity of comparative research may not be the only reason to shun it. Scholars might not be sufficiently confident in their skills to work with primary sources that are vastly different from those in their own fields and/or they might be unwilling to rely heavily on secondary studies. Barbieri assures his readers, however, that he is indeed capable of competently reading ancient Egyptian as well as early Chinese sources (pp. 5–7). He concludes his introductory remarks by outlining seven case studies, i.e., the monograph's seven main chapters, which he believes provide enough grounds for fruitful comparisons (pp. 12–18).

Chapter 1 illustrates how the recurring floods of the Nile and the Yellow River (Huanghe 黄河) each had a lasting impact on the physical, political, and ritual landscapes of Egypt and China. The Nile more or less annually overflowed its banks and left rich layers of fertile sediments in which farmers could cultivate their crops. As a result, the Nile has been considered Egypt's undisputed source of most life. In contrast, the timing of the Yellow River's floods was unpredictable and its deluge of water has often devastated the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. The powerful effects of these rivers on Egyptian and Chinese societies had

⁷ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

led to similar ways of dealing with them. Both cultures not only kept track of the rivers' water levels, but also tried to control them by building dams and irrigation systems. Due to the potentially destructive and lethal consequences of the Yellow River's floods and the occasional lack of the annual flood in Egypt, the political fates of rulers in both cultures became intricately tied to the ability to manage them. Further, the political elites of both cultures linked both rivers to divine powers and attempted to negotiate their level of impact on human society through regular rituals. The difference was that early Chinese emperor had to invest more manpower in their attempts to keep the volatile Yellow River at bay.

Chapter 2 examines Egypt and China as expanding empires and, more importantly, diplomatic entities. It argues that conquests were the "key defining trait" of all empires and that they were "justified and driven by ideological imperatives" (p. 51). Yet the available sources from both cultures suggest keenly pragmatic motives. Egyptian kings craved gold from Nubia⁸ and cedar wood from Lebanon "for elite coffins and palace architecture" (p. 79), while Chinese emperors chased the so-called Heavenly Horses (*tianma* 天馬) in the Ferghana Valley (modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) and jade from Khotan (modern-day Xinjiang). As the argument goes, the horses were needed to establish stud farms to support the Western Han's fight against the pastoralist Xiongnu 匈奴 in the northern steppes and jade to furnish elite burials and court rituals. Egypt and China both devised similar diplomatic strategies to maintain contact with the outside world. The chapter takes a cache of roughly 350 diplomatic letters (dated *c.* fifteenth and fourteenth centuries B.C.E.) that surfaced from the remains of the palace of King Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten; r. 1349–1332 B.C.E.) at Tell el-Amarna and administrative documents yielded by a relay station (Xuanquanzhi 懸泉置; dated *c.* first century B.C.E.–first century C.E.) in Gansu province as well as early Chinese historiography to be sufficient evidence of written correspondence as "the principal form of diplomacy" (p. 53) in both cultures. Egypt and China, likewise, invariably assumed the roles of superior partners in all diplomatic communication. In response to their exalting language, Barbieri identifies the "extremely subservient tone" in the answers of purportedly inferior parties as "fairly performative" (p. 61). In addition, marriage alliances were common means to sustain contacts with foreign polities in both cultures. These, however, were reserved for peers. Chinese emperors married off distant relatives, who had been elevated to the status of princesses, but never accepted alien brides themselves. Conversely, Egyptian kings refused to send Egyptian women to culturally inferior rulers and prided themselves

⁸ Barbieri did not explicitly discuss the significance of gold in ancient Egyptian diplomacy, but considered it to be "crucial to elite legitimation and material culture" (p. 52).

in taking many foreign wives. They considered the latter as another form of conquest. The essential insight of this chapter seems to be that diplomatic strategies such as marriage alliances were supposed “to stabilize relations and avert all-out war” (p. 75). Given that the general underlying purpose of diplomacy is to foster amicable relations and prevent war,⁹ this conclusion is slightly disappointing.

Chapter 3 explores the methods of two radical reformers whose policies eventually failed because they took the fledgling ideas of their predecessors too far. Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) and Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9–23 C.E.) both began their reigns by destroying the traditional ritual orders of their respective cultures and established “new” ones—“new” meaning that they made idealized versions of the past the main points of reference of their rules. Akhenaten moulded the Old Kingdom (c. 2670–2168 B.C.E.; p. xiii) into a template for his own time and Wang Mang did the same with the Western Zhou period (c. 1045–771 B.C.E.; p. xi). Both mounted large-scale propaganda mostly through the use of public writing in order to disseminate the changes they made to vital elements of imperial rule. For instance, Amenhotep IV changed his name to Akhenaten and replaced the archaic language of inscriptions with the current vernacular; Wang Mang altered the name of his dynasty from Han to Xin 新 (“New”) besides adjusting calendars and weights among other things. Ultimately, the effects of their reforms were limited since most changes were reversed after they had died. Subsequently, both were despised as despots whose name had to be erased from collective memory (Akhenaten) and whose life and career were tailored into cautionary tales for later generations of emperors by historians and intellectuals (Wang Mang).

Chapter 3 somewhat falls short of the imperative to explain rather than describe. For instance, the fact that Akhenaten and Wang Mang both presented their reforms as “return[s] to ‘first principles’” (p. 89) is certainly more than just “interesting to note” (p. 89). Following Barbieri’s premise, the goal would be to find out *why* they both considered the ideas and policies from previous periods to be valuable tools for their own times? *Why* did they deem idealized versions of the past as promising means to gain maximum support among their people? Akhenaten and Wang Mang broke with tradition, which, by definition, is supposed to connect past and present.¹⁰ I cannot help but wonder: why were idealized versions of the past taken to be more potent than tradition? In both cases, the answer can only be that in order to deny the recent, traditional past, i.e., to abolish established

⁹ See, for instance, Alexander L. George, “Strategies for Preventive Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Scholarship for Policymaking,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33.1 (Mar. 2000): 15–19.

¹⁰ Nelson H. H. Graburn, “What is Tradition?” *Museum Anthropology* 24.2–3 (Sep. 2000): 6–11.

ritual orders, the new Egyptian king and Chinese emperor had to fill more distant pasts with appropriate contents that legitimized their reforms and rules. The farther removed phenomena are from the events of the day, the easier they are to manipulate because they are no longer part of collective memories. To this day, the past is malleable and subject to constant reinvention in essentially all cultures.¹¹ In true opportunist manner, Akhenaten and Wang Mang both took advantage of empires in crises by running with some of the ideas of their forebears and promising their subjects a better future by invoking the glories of a bygone age. In short, in order to understand their motives, it might have been more helpful to thoroughly analyse the circumstances of their respective rise to power rather than solely discussing the outcomes of their individual ascents.

Chapter 4 returns to a macro-perspective and surveys the scope of state power. Egyptian kings and Chinese emperors alike were envisioned as divinely sanctioned rulers whose main task was to maintain order in the universe. Any kind of crime was said to disrupt the delicate balance between the human and transcendental spheres and required corrective actions. The need to prosecute and prevent infractions of the law impacted all subjects. Yet, the level at which rulers and the state interfered with the lives of their subjects differed in the two cultures. Egyptian jurisdiction was mostly in the hands of local courts and communities, which handled crimes such as theft and adultery in a fairly informal way. For instance, guilty parties could be forced to swear oaths by which they vowed not to repeat their crimes. The Han legal system offered no hope of similarly lenient judgment. The early imperial state was built on a rigorous bureaucracy whose main purpose was to implement laws that permeated all aspects of life. Relatively minor offences such as theft required prosecution as much as murder did. Seeing that the rules of Egyptian kings and Chinese emperors depended on their ability to keep the universe running smoothly, it seems only natural that the severity of punishment for crimes was determined by the degree of threat they posed to cosmic harmony.

¹¹ For general studies on intentional manipulations of the past, see, for instance, Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–14; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983); Eric Taylor Woods and Mira Debs, "Towards a Cultural Sociology of Nations and Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism* 19.4 (Oct. 2013): 607–14. For an excellent study of uses of the past in early and contemporary China, see Vincent S. Leung, *The Politics of the Past in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) and Lena Scheen, "The History of Shanghai," in David Ludden, ed., *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

For instance, perpetrators who encroached on official rituals or harmed the tombs of rulers received the most severe sentences. The chapter also ends on a mildly underwhelming note as it merely reiterates parallels and differences between both cultures, but offers no explanation as to why they developed partially alternate solutions for comparable problems.

Chapter 5 introduces low-level Egyptian and Chinese scribes as pillars of both states who confidently defied the disdain of members of higher social strata. They emphasized their ability to read and write in life as well as death primarily through the display of scribal material culture. For instance, numerous Egyptian and Chinese scribes were buried with writing tools and texts. One Egyptian scribe apparently carved his own name on 239 graffiti in the so-called Valley of Kings. The fact that scribes were literate enabled them to fulfil crucial social functions despite their comparably low statuses, be it by serving one of Egypt's richest men or maintaining law and order on the margins of the Chinese empire. These men were fully aware of their own significance and projected their scribal identity into the afterlife. Tombs of Egyptian scribes visually represented the deceased in various kinds of media, e.g., mummified bodies, anthropomorphic coffins, and statues, whereas Chinese scribal tombs completely lacked visual renditions of their occupants. References to their individual identities—as opposed to the role identity of scribes¹²—appeared as records of their names in some manuscripts and the occasional seal. However, the chapter does not probe deeper into possible reasons for such notably different modes of self-representation.

Chapter 6 traces Egyptian and Chinese notions of the afterlife through the lens of tomb miniatures, such as figurines of humans and livestock as well as models of buildings, workshops, and means of transportation. It challenges the idea that figurines and models were but “mere substitutes for the real thing” (p. 188), meaning that miniatures did more than replace human sacrifices or actual workshops. At the very least, they were “analogous to the real” (p. 189) and some were “even more efficacious to the deceased than the real thing” (p. 189). The latter assertion refers to fact that several kinds of models in both cultures were related to food production. Unlike their counterparts in the worlds of the living, these offered the opportunity to generate and process foodstuffs for all eternity (as long as the miniatures themselves did not decay). The chapter also argues that tomb assemblages likely exaggerated the numbers of servants, livestock, and model facilities that the deceased would have commanded while they were still alive.

¹² On different kinds of identity in early Chinese scribal tombs, see Armin Selbitschka, “‘I Write Therefore I Am’: Scribes, Literacy, and Identity in Early China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 78.2 (Dec. 2018): 413–76, here 460–65.

Thus, miniatures turned tombs into symbolic spaces that were often “aspirational” (p. 191) in the sense that the deceased inflated their social status. These seem to have been fairly high to begin with, as the chapter argues that tomb miniatures appear to have been limited to burials of the wealthy individuals, persons of authority, and the nobility. Overall, burying the deceased with miniatures were not static customs. In Egypt, images gradually replaced tomb miniatures. In China, images complemented figurines and models, but never supplanted them. On the contrary, the spectrum of social roles depicted by figurines and models widened over time and extended the symbolic spaces of tombs still further.

Reading Chapter 6 left me with two larger questions. First, what might have been the underlying reasons for using different media in creating a “model afterlife” (p. 171)? What made Egyptians favour images in later periods? Why did Chinese tomb occupants largely stick with tomb miniatures? Second, if miniature figurines and models were integral elements of such model afterlives, how do we have to imagine the afterlives of people whose tombs did not feature tomb miniatures? Did they share similar views with members of the upper echelons of society? If so, what kinds of sources would even enable us to access their (after)life-worlds? As my discussion of Chapter 7 below will illustrate, the book only brushes past the issue of how widely held such notions may have been.

Chapter 7 argues that both cultures developed notions of paradises that could be accessed by the use of board games. Such paradises could either be places at remote locations (e.g. Mt. Kunlun 崑崙山 in China), the heavens, or the underworld (e.g., the fertile “Marsh of Reeds” in Egypt). Egypt cultivated the belief that only the worthy were able to enter paradise. With respect to China, Barbieri reprises a speculation (p. 28) from Chapter 1. According to it, intellectuals came up with ideas for various paradises because they wanted “to escape the hell of their world” (p. 28), which was plagued by incessant warfare in the Warring States period (453–221 B.C.E.) and repeated natural disasters in the early empire (221 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). Overall, he confidently asserts that perceptions of paradise were “felt by many levels of society” (p. 208), although he does not offer any evidence that might warrant such sweeping claims. The fact that many deceased were buried with food in both cultures does not at all prove that the idea “of a postmortem paradise [had] develop[ed] and spread through much of society” (p. 208). In fact, it has been argued that food as a burial good had no relation to afterlife ideas whatsoever.¹³ At least in the case of early China, we do not have to go that far. On the contrary, there is sufficient evidence that food was interred

¹³ See, for instance, Mike Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), p. 10.

with the deceased precisely for the purpose of sustaining them in some form of transcendental existence.¹⁴ That being said, beliefs in post-mortem existences by no means presuppose beliefs in paradisiacal afterlives. As for the broad acceptance of the latter, some scholars have made compelling arguments that past contentions to that effect have grossly overstated the available evidence. This is true for both ancient Egypt and early China as the following paragraph will illustrate.¹⁵

Barbieri's confidence extends into the discussion of dual souls as the central elements of beliefs concerning paradise. The entity known as *ka* to the Egyptians was a unique life force that may be understood as "a body double" (p. 209) of the individual. *Ba*, in turn, "was closer to the Western idea of a soul" because it contained "the personality of the human being and was what made them a unique individual" (p. 209). Moreover, under ideal circumstances, *ka* and *ba* were reunited after death and morphed into the "eternal, perfect being" (p. 209) *akh*. It so happens, a small number of Chinese thinkers promoted the idea of a twofold soul as well. Barbieri stated that "if one follows the account in Yü Ying-shih's classic study on early Chinese afterlife conceptions, one could say that many people in early China also believed in a component soul" (p. 214). Obviously, he himself subscribes to Yü Ying-shih's reading. There is but one problem: only a limited number of early Chinese texts that were written by members of an intellectual elite touch upon the issue of "soul(s)."¹⁶ More significantly, over

¹⁴ See my "Sacrifice vs. Sustenance: Food as a Burial Good in Late Pre-Imperial and Early Imperial Chinese Tombs and Its Relation [to] Funerary Rites," *Early China* 41 (2018): 179–243; "Quotidian Afterlife: Grain, Granary Models, and the Notion of Continuing Sustenance in Late Pre-imperial and Early Imperial Tombs," in Shing Müller and Armin Selbitschka, eds., *Über den Alltag hinaus: Festschrift für Thomas O. Höllmann zum 65. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017), pp. 89–106.

¹⁵ For ancient Egypt, see, for instance, Susanne Bickel, "Everybody's Afterlife? 'Pharaonisation' in the Pyramid Texts," in Susanne Bickel and Lucía Díaz-Iglesias, eds., *Studies in Ancient Egyptian Funerary Literature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), pp. 119–48; Harold M. Hays, "The Death of the Democratization of the Afterlife," in Nigel Strudwick and Helen Strudwick, eds., *Old Kingdom, New Perspectives: Egyptian Art and Archaeology, 2750–2150 BC* (Oxford and Oakville: Oxbow Books, 2011), pp. 115–30. I am grateful to Carl Elkins for bringing both articles to my attention. Also see Mark Smith, "Democratization of the Afterlife," in Willeke Wendrich, Jacco Dieleman Elizabeth Froot, and John Baines, eds., *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* (Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles, 2009), pp. 1–16. <http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz001nf62b> (last accessed on 13 January 2022).

¹⁶ Considering the importance that Barbieri placed on the concept of "soul," it is surprising that he takes its meaning as a given. His observation that the Egyptian concept of "*ba*"
(Continued on next page)

twenty-five years ago, Kenneth Brashier's comprehensive analysis of *all* relevant passages impressively has shown that a belief in two souls was at best a minority opinion among early Chinese writers.¹⁷ Barbieri was aware of Brashier's study, as he explicitly acknowledges it when pointing out that a neat distinction between a "corporeal soul" (*po* 魄) akin to the Egyptian *ka* and a "celestial soul" (*hun* 魂) that would travel to paradise might have been "too scholastic and systematized" (p. 214; 275, n. 22). However, Barbieri's engagement with Brashier's argument ends there, despite the fact that it would be vital for readers to learn on what evidence he has built the confidence to contradict Brashier's conclusive results. Furthermore, seeing that "few ancient Egyptian texts make any connection between these two entities [i.e., *ka* and *ba*], and when they do, only quite indirectly," the idea of two discrete and mutually dependent "souls" apparently was not widely held in Egypt either.¹⁸

As I have already mentioned, Chapter 7 predominantly revolves around the Egyptian *senet* and Chinese *liubo* 六博 board games. It contends that both were played by the living, but their key function was to guide the souls of the deceased into the netherworld. The post-mortem fates of the dead were literally tied to their fates on the game boards since rolling dices and throwing sticks determined the movement of tokens. Both games invoked divine powers: *Liubo* boards were

(Note 16—*Continued*)

was closer to the Western idea of a soul" in the sense that "[i]t held the personality of the human being and was what made them a unique individual" (p. 209) does not necessarily reflect prevailing views among Egyptologists. For instance, Louis V. Žabkar has attested "that the Ba was never considered to be one of the constituent parts of a human composite, the 'spiritual' element in man or the 'soul' of man, but was considered to represent the man himself, the totality of his physical and psychic capacities"; see his *A Study of the Ba Concept in Ancient Egyptian Texts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 3; also see pp. 161–62. I am grateful to Rune Nyord for bringing Žabkar's book to my attention. Neither did *hun* and *po* fit a modern definition of "soul." Kenneth Brashier has superbly shown that "[t]he *hunpo* is not necessarily conscious, not spiritual, and not even uniquely human, and so the Western translation 'soul' seems an ill fit at best." See K[enneth] E. Brashier, "Han Thanatology and the Division of 'Souls,'" *Early China* 21 (1996): 125–58, here 151.

¹⁷ See n. 16, above.

¹⁸ Rune Nyord, *Seeing Perfection: Ancient Egyptian Images beyond Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 21. For similar arguments concerning the Middle Kingdom (c. 2040–1656 B.C.E.), see Rune Nyord, "The Concept of *ka* between Egyptian and Egyptological Frameworks," in Rune Nyord, ed., *Concepts in Middle Kingdom Funerary Culture: Proceedings of the Lady Wallis Budge Anniversary Symposium Held at Christ's College, Cambridge, 22 January 2016* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 150–205, esp. 202.

cosmographs, whose patterns were likewise used in divination, and *senet* boards depicted gods. As miniature versions of the universes, they both facilitated the smooth transfer of Egyptian and Chinese souls to their paradisiacal destinations.

Ancient Egypt and Early China concludes with an epilogue that reprises the goals of the study. We learn that it is supposed to reveal “broad cultural patterns as well as the details of material culture and the lives of individuals” (p. 228), before seeing the major insights from the seven chapters / case studies and some avenues for future comparative research.

Indeed, *Ancient Egypt and Early China* paints a vivid and detailed picture of ancient Egyptian and early Chinese artefacts and the biographies of several people. The monograph’s elegant prose makes it easy to follow the narrative and its intuitive structure further enhances easy access to its contents. I appreciated the fact that the book offers brief outlines of key issues at the beginning and synopses at the end of each chapter. Numerous aptly chosen headers and subheads throughout the chapters allow for convenient navigation of the text. In addition, the author is very clear about and usually critical in his engagement with the primary sources—material culture as well as literature—that informed the study. All of this renders the monograph a treasure trove of information on ancient Egypt and early China. Readers, who already appreciate the advantages of comparative research, will not be disappointed. Some of those who do not may even be converted.

The monograph might have converted even more sceptics if it had pursued its goals a bit further. Granted, Barbieri never intended “to make grand civilization-level comparisons” (p. 228), yet he explicitly emphasizes the need to prioritize explanations over descriptions in comparative research. As my comments throughout this review have indicated, the book’s comparisons often remain in the realm of description. Readers may look in vain for the “causal variables that explain particular historical outcomes” (p. 6) that the book’s introduction promises. The conclusion of Chapter 1 (p. 47) is an excellent example of how one can explain the root causes of particular outcomes of historical processes. The conclusions of the subsequent chapters and the entire epilogue lack its analytical depth. Another weakness of the monograph is its occasional propensity to gloss over alternative points of view. I have discussed the purported duality of souls in early China in detail. However, this is but one of several examples.¹⁹

¹⁹ For instance, the author argues that *liubo* “was probably never just a secular pastime” (p. 222) and adds that I have contended that “the game was predominantly a ‘profane’ pastime, supported by its inclusion in tombs with items associated with banqueting rather than with ritual items” (p. 275, n. 39). As a matter of fact, my conclusion was based

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All in all, *Ancient Egypt and Early China* is a bold gamble that largely pays off, regardless of its occasional analytical and methodological shortcomings. As a survey of two distinct fields of research, it may very well help to bring Egyptology and Early China Studies closer together in the future. There is much to be learned for scholars from both fields and anyone with an interest in either of these cultures.

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(Note 19—*Continued*)

on comprehensive analyses of *all* available information on the *liubo* game, that is to say mortuary data *and received texts*. See Armin Selbitschka, “A Tricky Game: A Re-evaluation of Liubo 六博 based on Archaeological and Textual Evidence,” *Oriens Extremus* 55 (2016): 105–66.