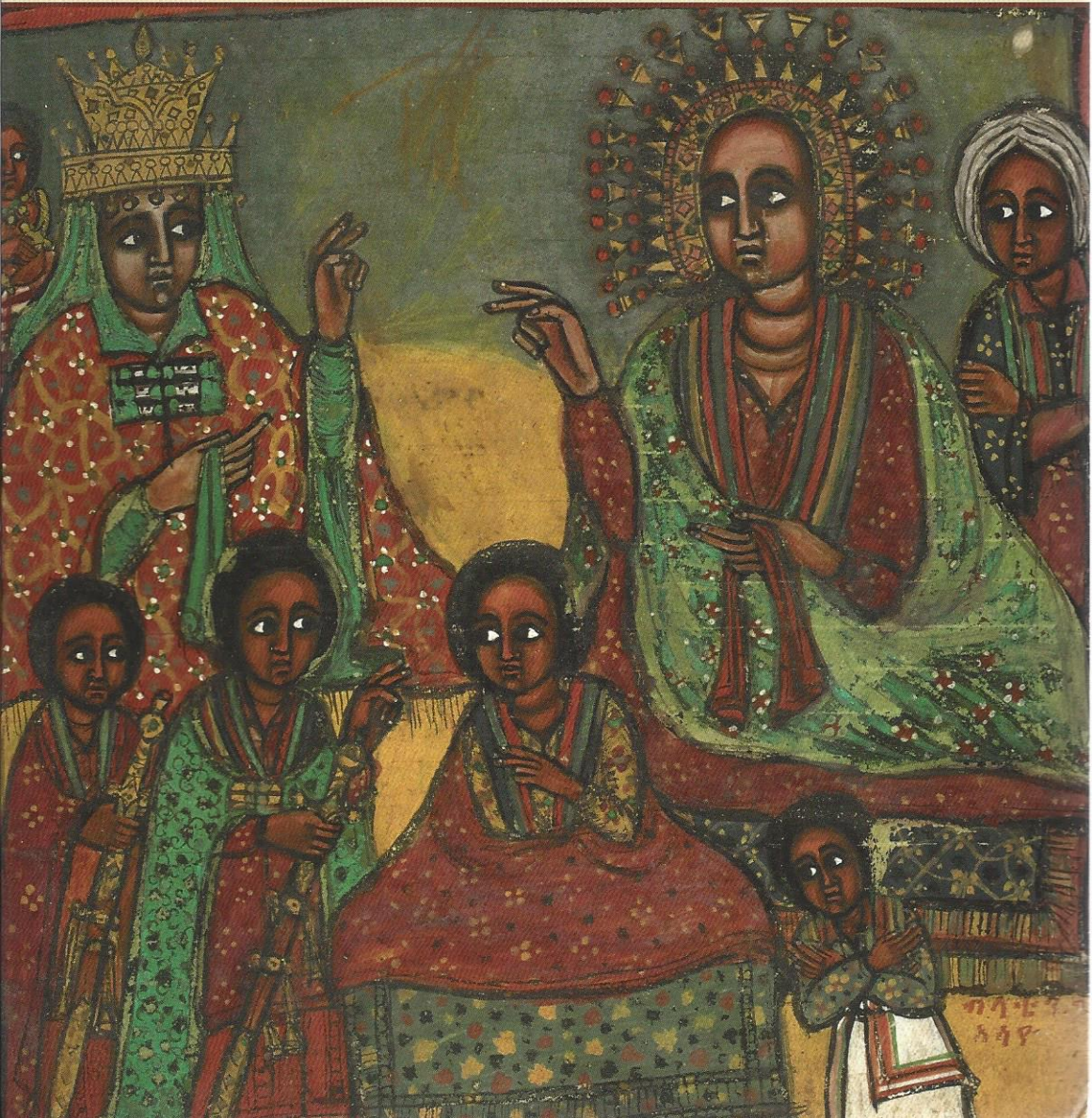


# DYNASTIES

*A Global History of Power, 1300–1800*

Jeroen Duindam



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## Introduction

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One cannot imagine a dynasty without civilization, while a civilization without dynasty and royal authority is impossible, because human beings must by nature co-operate, and that calls for a restraining influence. Political leadership, based either on religious or royal authority, is obligatory . . . This is what is meant by dynasty.

Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, ed. Franz Rosenthal, Book IV, chap. 20, 291.

### **Kinship to kingship?**

Dynasty plays a marginal role in today's world. Most modern political systems define themselves as the antithesis of *ancien régime* monarchy, with election as the prime method of succession to high office and a strong bias against family-based networks of power. Royalty retains a surprising potential to attract crowds and generate veneration, but it is mostly seen as the relic of an earlier and darker age. Such reservations about kingship have a long history. Hippocrates (460–377 BCE) observed that 'where there are kings, there must be the greatest cowards. For [here] men's souls are enslaved, and refuse to run risks readily and recklessly to increase the power of somebody else.'<sup>1</sup> This connection between kingship and servitude has been noted many times since. The Englishman J. Alfred Skertchly, visiting the West African kingdom of Dahomey in the early 1870s, enjoyed the remarkable honour of being proclaimed a prince by the reigning king Glele (?–1858–1889).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, he ridiculed the obligatory ritual greeting performed by all who approached the king:

The . . . salutation consists of a prostration before the monarch with the forehead touching the sand, and afterwards rubbing the cheeks on the earth, leaving a red patch of sand on either side . . . Then follows the dirt bath . . . a series of shovelling

<sup>1</sup> Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places*, in *Hippocrates*, vol. I, trans. W.H.S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, 1923), 133.

<sup>2</sup> Following the first mention of all rulers in this book, three years are given in parentheses: birth, start of reign, end of reign. Question marks replace uncertain or unknown dates; where the end of the reign did not coincide with the death of the ruler, the last year is followed by an asterisk: \*.

of the earth over the head . . . when receiving or asking any particular favour, the saluter completely smothers himself with the red earth; rubbing it well into the arms and neck until it sticks to the perspiring skin like dough.<sup>3</sup>

The extreme elevation of one person over others does not conform to modern sensibilities. In 1786, one of Europe's leading monarchs, Habsburg emperor Joseph II (1741–1780–1790), abolished the reverence on bended knee at the Austrian court, arguing that this show of respect 'is unnecessary between humans, and should be reserved for God alone'.<sup>4</sup> The authority of hereditary princes strikes us as the inverse image of modern egalitarian society: it is often portrayed in contrast to modernity, as the undesirable situation from which we emancipated ourselves. However, almost all peoples across the globe until very recently accepted dynastic rule as a god-given and desirable form of power.

Throughout history, rule by a single male figure has predominated. These men rarely ruled without some guidance from mothers, spouses, and female relatives, yet women rulers holding supreme sovereign power remained the exception, even in societies where royalty was transferred through the female line.<sup>5</sup> Chiefs, kings, and emperors reigned over most

<sup>3</sup> J. Alfred Skertchly, *Dahomey As It Is: Being a Narrative of Eight Months' Residence in that Country* . . . (London, 1874), 143.

<sup>4</sup> Jeroen Duindam, 'The Burgundian-Spanish legacy in European court life: a brief reassessment and the example of the Austrian Habsburgs', *Publication du Centre européen d'études bourguignonnes*, 46 (2006), 203–220, full quotation at 216 ('weil dieses zwischen Menschen und Menschen keine geziemende Handlung ist die Gott allein vorbehalten bleiben muß').

<sup>5</sup> On women and rule, see Chapter 2 below. On China, see Keith McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule. Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Han to Liao* (Lanham, MD, 2013). On Southeast Asia, see Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, HI, 2006), 165–96. On Europe, see recently Matthias Schnettger, 'Weibliche Herrschaft in der Frühen Neuzeit: einige Beobachtungen aus verfassungs- und politikgeschichtlicher Sicht', *Zeitenblicke*, 8/2 (2009), [www.zeitenblicke.de/2009/2/schnettger/dippArticle.pdf](http://www.zeitenblicke.de/2009/2/schnettger/dippArticle.pdf); Ann Lyon, 'The place of women in European royal succession in the Middle Ages', *Liverpool Law Review*, 27/3 (2006), 361–93. On African matrilineal contexts, see Tarikhu Farrar, 'The queenmother, matriarchy, and the question of female political authority in precolonial West African monarchy', *Journal of Black Studies*, 27/5 (1997), 579–97. For a wider overview of female political roles, see Annie M.D. Lebeuf, 'La rôle de la femme dans l'organisation politique des sociétés africaines', in Denise Paulme (ed.), *Femmes d'Afrique noire*, (Paris, 1960), 93–120. For an example of sovereign female rule in southern Africa, see E. Jensen Krige and J.D. Krige, *The Realm of a Rain-Queen: A Study of the Pattern of Lovedu Society* (Oxford, 1943). On double descent or 'dual political systems' with matching leadership roles for women and men, see e.g. Beverly J. Stoeltje, 'Asante queen mothers', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 810/1 (1997), 41–71; Isabel Yaya, *The Two Faces of Inca History: Dualism in the Narratives and Cosmology of Ancient Cuzco* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2012). See also Joyce Marcus, 'Breaking the glass ceiling: the strategies of royal women in ancient states', in Cecelia F. Klein (ed.), *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America* (Washington, DC, 2001), 305–40. See in general the volume edited by Anne Walthall, *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History* (Berkeley, CA, 2008).



polities across the globe for the last 10,000 years. Around 8000 BCE, the domestication of plant and animal life enabled the emergence of larger-scale settlements, a process which spread from different core areas to envelop the larger part of the world. Small and mobile kinship-based groups ruled by elders or chiefs will have arisen far earlier, but the expanding scale of sedentary settlements and the increased possibility of amassing surplus now stimulated social differentiation, hierarchy, and conquest. In many places 'stateless' societies persisted. Almost invariably though, dynastic leaders arose where hierarchy and differentiation developed. In the process, the scale of polities expanded: small groups led by chiefs were brought together under the authority of 'paramount chiefs' or kings. In the long run, kingdoms were sometimes absorbed by kings-of-kings or emperors. Royalty often presented itself as originating in conquest, with a stranger subduing the local population and founding a line of kings.<sup>6</sup> Ruling over an assemblage of groups previously unconnected or even hostile, kings were presented as standing above faction and as safeguarding harmony, both within society and between heaven and earth.

In whichever way royal leaders actually emerged or represented their origins, the dynastic organisation of power lasted. Dynasties could be short-lived or enduring; successful in creating a pacified and coherent polity or prone to violence and catastrophically inept. The dynastic set-up of power, however, proved to be remarkably persistent. The extended overarching polities which emerged in several continents were almost universally headed by dynastic leaders. The *pater familias* was head of his clan or family as well as leader of a polity; a simple mortal glorified as a demigod. The clash of these roles forms one of the themes of this book.

Dynasty persists into the modern world, but it has lost much of its aura during recent centuries. With the emergence of industrialised and urbanised societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, alternative forms of power have become more prominent. Kingship evolved at a point where societies moved beyond kinship as the key principle of social organisation; it retreated in modern urban and industrial society. Kinship

<sup>6</sup> On strangers and conquerors in general, see Marshall Sahlins, 'The stranger-king or, Elementary forms of the politics of life', *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 36/105 (2008), 177–99; on the conquest nature of African kingdoms, see Jan Vansina, 'A comparison of African kingdoms', *Africa*, 32 (1962), 324–35, at 329. Specific explanations for the repeated story of migration and conquest in an African context can be found in Claude Tardits (ed.), *Princes & serviteurs du royaume: cinq études de monarchies africaines* (Paris, 1987), 20; Aidan Southall, 'The segmentary state in Africa and Asia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30/1 (1988), 52–82, at 61–3; and Lebeuf, 'La rôle de la femme', points to women as the mythic partners of stranger-kings, indicating the union of different peoples under one dynasty. See also Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells, 'Strangers' and "stranger-kings": the Sayyid in eighteenth-century maritime Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 40, Special Issue 3 (2009), 567–91.

and family, however, remain a force to be reckoned with. Personalised and enduring forms of leadership in politics and in business tend to acquire semi-dynastic traits even in the contemporary world. In autocratic states, the power of modern-day dynasts extends far beyond anything their predecessors could have imagined.<sup>7</sup>

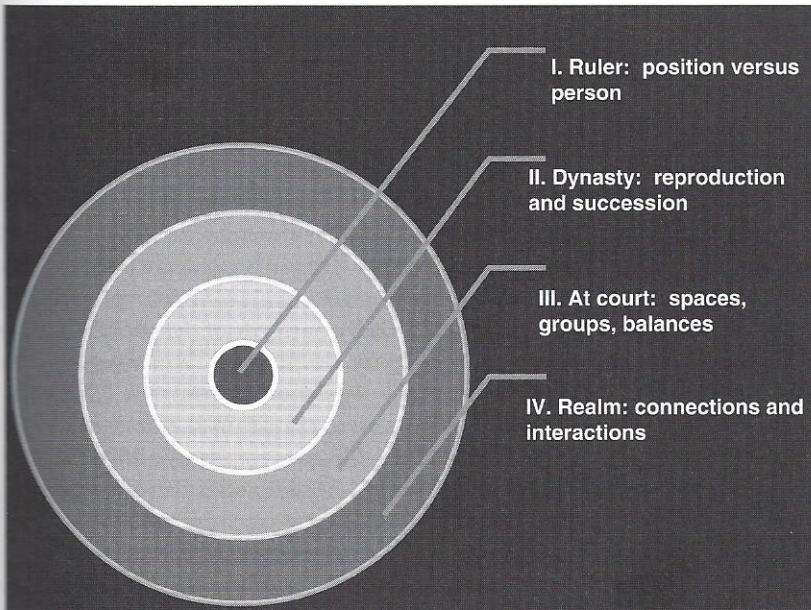
Dynastic power throughout history shares some basic features. Kingship, emerging as an extension of kinship when a clan or lineage imposed its hierarchical supremacy on other descent groups, retains a powerful connection to family and genealogy. Deriving from the ancient Greek term for lordship and sovereignty, 'dynasty' is now commonly understood as a ruling family, a line of kings or princes.<sup>8</sup> While hereditary succession was never a universal aspect of polities governed by kings or emperors across the globe, the ruler's kin was close to power. The ruler and his relatives were served by a household of retainers and advisors. The material environment of these groups, whether a simple dwelling or a grand palace, structured access to the ruler. A focal point of redistribution and ritual, the dynastic centre interacted in various ways with society at large. This book examines these social patterns around dynastic rulers at four levels, beginning with and moving outwards from the figure in the centre: ruler, dynasty, court, and realm. At each of these levels, certain tensions arose; closer inspection reveals how quite distinct social patterns, which emerged around the world, can be understood as alternative solutions to these tensions (see Figure 1).

A single figure stood at the heart of the polity, governing as well as representing the realm as a mascot or totem. All kings, talented or inept, were subject to certain structural complications. The more the position of the ruler was elevated to omnipotence or sacrality, the more it tended to circumscribe the person on the throne. Hierarchical pre-eminence and ritual responsibilities severely limited the freedom of incumbent kings,

<sup>7</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London, 2007); Russ Baker, *Family of Secrets: The Bush Dynasty, America's Invisible Government, and the Hidden History of the Last Fifty Years* (New York, 2009); Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York, 2006). Examples from the business world can be found in João de Pina-Cabral and Antónia Pedroso de Lima (eds.), *Elites: Choice, Leadership and Succession* (Oxford, 2000); see also the thirteen business dynasties in David S. Landes, *Dynasties: Fortunes and Misfortunes of the World's Great Family Businesses* (New York, 2006); for a typology mixing dynastic empires and modern totalitarian regimes, see Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> On dynasty and its various meanings in antiquity, see Cinzia Bearzot, 'Dynasteia, idea of Greece', in Roger S. Bagnall et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (Oxford, 2012), 2240–1; Mischa Meier and Meret Strothmann, 'Dynasteia', in Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (eds.), *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopædia of the Ancient World*, online edition (Leiden, 2002–) (accessed 9 October 2014); *OED Online* (accessed 6 March 2014).





1 The layout of this book: concentric circles around the ruler.

complicated their personal relationships, and thwarted active political roles. The first chapter of this book examines the tension between position and person, between the ideals of kingship and the lives of the figures actually ruling. Do the expectations and ideas surrounding kingship contain shared or general elements globally? Do we find contrasting templates for rulership? How did youngsters learn to adopt such roles, and how did they cope with their elevated position from adolescence to maturity and old age? For long-living rulers in particular, this was a daunting challenge: where could they seek intimacy and support, whom could they trust without misgivings? Tensions between the unpredictable qualities of the persons ascending to the throne and the variable but consistently heavy demands of the position arose in many forms, and affected strong as well as weak rulers. These epithets – strong and weak, good and bad – need to be placed against the background of the tension between person and position. Strong-willed and intelligent figures, spurred by the demands of government but vexed by the restrictions placed on their shoulders, could respond by turning into archetypically ‘bad’ rulers resorting to violence or retreating into their palaces. Conversely, wholly undistinguished and pliable characters, lucky in

their choice of advisors and passively following the latter's dictates, were likely to be remembered as good or wise rulers.

Moving one step away from the central figure, close relatives and the spouses or consorts come into view. The dynasty or royal clan around a ruler could be delimited in many ways, a process determined by traditions and choices regarding dynastic reproduction and succession. Women, only in exceptional cases themselves occupying the uppermost position of authority, were sometimes seen as the vehicles of royalty. In matrilineal polities, only sons of royal women could ascend to the throne, whereas the status of the father was irrelevant for succession. Female agency was determined not only by patterns of descent, but also by reproduction: harem-based polygyny dominated dynasties worldwide, whereas monogamous marriage was the rule only in Christian Europe. Numerous offspring safeguarded continuity, but foreboded rivalry. Siring only a few children made it easier to satisfy sibling ambitions, but increased the risk of extinction. All dynasties were concerned about the absence of direct successors and many were forced to seek alternative strategies such as adoption. The second chapter of this book examines the rich variety of arrangements for reproduction and succession – charting the agency of women and the place of royal relatives in dynastic settings. It challenges definitions of dynasty based exclusively on heredity, showing many alternatives to the concentration of power inherent in male primogeniture or eldest-son succession. Rights of succession invariably engendered tensions.<sup>9</sup> Relatives close to succession and sharing in dynastic prestige could act as powerful supporters, but they were liable to turn into dangerous rivals. How did dynastic rulers and their advisors deal with this challenge? What patterns can be found in the attitudes, functions, and locations of relatives eligible for succession?

Servants form the third concentric circle around the dynastic ruler: the household or court. Rulers and their relatives were served by an establishment catering for their daily needs as well as for the government of the realm. Who served the ruler in these different capacities? From which status groups in society were these servants drawn? Courts have traditionally been seen as arenas of conflict, the preservation of royal power as contingent upon exploiting rivalries among groups at court: *divide et impera*.<sup>10</sup> Some rulers were able to manipulate conflict, others were

<sup>9</sup> Jack Goody (ed.), *Succession to High Office* (Cambridge, 1966).

<sup>10</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* (Oxford, 1983), elaborates on Max Weber's typology of power, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen, 1972 [1921]); see the discussion and bibliography in Jeroen Duindam, *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court* (Amsterdam, 1995).



undermined by it, yet beyond these individual variations, some recurring patterns of conflict can be established. Tensions between 'inner' and 'outer' court staffs can be found in many places, pitting lesser-ranking confidants who were constantly in the ruler's proximity against prestigious state dignitaries whose connections with the ruler remained more distanced. Rulers themselves could seek support in inner court circles against overbearing relatives, nobles, or advisors. At most courts, as in most houses, some areas were easily accessible whereas others were more restricted. Palace layouts can be found for many courts in history. A comparative examination of these materials makes it possible to link status, functions, and gender to palace topography and to the issue of access to the ruler.

Finally, this aggregate of groups around the ruler as a whole was expected to engage in exchanges with its wider social environment. How did the dynastic court, a household inflated to extraordinary proportions, cultivate its relationship with the territories under its control? The court accumulated wealth through taxes, tribute, or gift-giving; it distributed offices, ranks, and honours. More often than not, it served as a centre of redistribution, as a source of rewards and punishments, as a locus of conspicuous hospitality, as the highest court of appeal, and as the key venue of ritual celebration. Courts connected numerous groups to their own expanded services, on a permanent or temporary basis, or through a system of ranks and rewards. In addition, they attracted state servants, soldiers, petitioners, litigants, purveyors, artists, and fortune-seekers in all guises. Great rituals drew participants and spectators to the court, to experience at first hand the spectacle of dynastic supremacy. Depending on individual temperament and regional traditions, rulers could adopt extroverted or withdrawn styles of representation. Whether or not rulers personally engaged with their subjects, all courts sought to convince wider audiences that their power could not be challenged. These audiences, however, were not always favourably impressed by the show of power at the centre. How did they view the principle of dynastic rule and its main protagonists?

### **Scope: time and place**

A systematic and global examination of these four dimensions of dynastic rule demands a wide scope based on numerous examples. This can be achieved only by leaving aside the wider ecological, social, economic, and cultural contexts of the selected examples. Although regional traditions of rulership are discussed at some length in the first chapter, the historic roots, the ideals, and the sacral nature of kingship are given less

prominence in this book than the social context of dynastic rule.<sup>11</sup> Rightly or wrongly, I assume that differences in the cultural representation and understanding of rulership do not diminish the universality of the four domains singled out here for further scrutiny. The impact of different traditions will become clear in the examination of dynastic practice. A focus on the breadth and variety of the examples uncovers patterns that remain hidden in detailed studies of single dynasties in their specific cultural settings. My comparison provides an open and dynamic model of dynastic power that cannot be obtained by concentration on any single case, or even by in-depth comparison of a few selected cases.

This examination of the social setting of dynastic rulers at the apex of society deserves a truly world-historical scale, accepting no limitations in time or place. Such an all-encompassing comparative effort, however, can hardly be achieved by a single individual. My examination is limited to the period between the end of the Mongol conquests and the rise of unchallenged European hegemony, from around 1300 to the early decades of the nineteenth century. It includes examples from the entire period, but focuses on the years after 1550.<sup>12</sup> In this phase of increasingly dense global contact, dynastic power and courtly splendour reached their apex in Europe as well as in Asia, from Versailles via Topkapı, Delhi, and Isfahan to the Forbidden City.<sup>13</sup> In Africa, too, spectacular examples of court culture appear in these centuries. Trade with Europe loomed large in the make-up of kingdoms along Africa's western coast: the growth of dynastic power and luxury here was contingent on slavery.<sup>14</sup> Only in the nineteenth century, however, did European colonial governance move

<sup>11</sup> See the classic works by J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London, 1987 [1922]); Arthur M. Hocart, *Kingship* (London, 1927); and Hocart, *Kings and Councillors: An Essay in the Comparative Anatomy of Human Society* (Chicago, 1970 [1936]). For recent discussions and bibliographies, see Declan Quigley (ed.), *The Character of Kingship* (Oxford, 2005); W.M. Spellman, *Monarchies 1000–2000* (London, 2001); Francis Oakley, *Kingship: The Politics of Enchantment* (Oxford, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> On parallel developments in Europe and Asia, see Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2003–9), and Jack Goldstone's review of this work, 'New patterns in global history: a review essay on *Strange Parallels* by Victor Lieberman', *Cliodynamics*, 1/1 (2010), 92–102; and Goldstone, 'The problem of the "early modern" world', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 41/3 (1998), 249–84.

<sup>13</sup> Japan seems to be the exception here, with the classic age of imperial court splendour in the Heian period (794–1185) outshining the military and political consolidation under the Tokugawa shoguns, at least in terms of the scholarly attention it has received. Possibly the same can be said about Majapahit in relation to the early modern sultanates in the archipelago, where the Dutch East India Company soon became a force to be reckoned with.

<sup>14</sup> John K. Thornton, *A Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250–1820* (Cambridge, 2012), 82, explicitly relates the rise of relatively centralised kingdoms in West Africa to their slavery-based income, which allowed the build-up of military power and courtly



older political structures into the margins. Change came more rapidly and destructively in the Americas after 1492. The Spanish conquest ended the relatively recent Aztec and Inka imperial ventures, instituting European-style viceregal regimes. My comparison necessarily ends where European hegemony became so consolidated that local regimes were subjugated or adopted European-style reforms.

Few dynasties lasted throughout the five centuries following 1300, and even in these cases continuity usually was a mixture of demographic reality, haphazard improvisation, and genealogical make-believe. The period roughly corresponds to the time-span of the Ottoman dynasty (1299–1922), the two ‘Late Imperial’ Chinese dynasties, Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912), and the period of Muslim rule in northern India from the Delhi sultanate dynasties (1206–1526) to the Mughals (1526–1857). The Tokugawa *shoguns* ruled from 1600 onwards, while the imperial dynasty, thanks to several unobtrusive reparations of demographic mishaps, could boast a remarkable longevity from early into modern Japan. The Javanese sultans of Mataram, who started their rule in the late sixteenth and continued into the eighteenth century, claimed a link with the preceding house of Majapahit (1293–1527).<sup>15</sup> Other dynasties in the archipelago and on the Southeast Asian mainland likewise construed genealogical continuity, but none actually seems to have lasted throughout these centuries. In Europe, the same period comprises the rise and fall of numerous dynasties and the persistence of others, such as the Habsburgs. Only a few African dynasties lasted throughout this period. The Sefuwa dynasty of Kanem-Bornu around Lake Chad, which converted to Islam in the eleventh century, lasted into the nineteenth century. Its remarkable record was matched by the Christian ‘Solomonic’ dynasty in Ethiopia, which gained power in the thirteenth century while posing as successor to an earlier Solomonic tradition. The power of the Solomonids

splendour without increased taxation. The same point is made by Emmanuel Terray, ‘L’économie politique du royaume Abon du Gyaman’, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 22 (1982), 251–75. More generally on the role of slavery in the rise of West African kingdoms, see Robin Law, ‘Dahomey and the slave trade: reflections on the historiography of the rise of Dahomey’, *Journal of African History*, 27 (1986), 237–67; Anne Caroline Bailey, *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame* (Boston, MA, 2005), chap. 3, on African agency including Dahomey and Asante; and most recently, Sean Stilwell, *Slavery and Slaving in African History* (Cambridge, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Soemarsaid Moertono, *State and Statecraft in Old Java: A Study of the Later Mataram Period, 16th to 19th Century* (Ithaca, NY, 1963), 7–9, also 53 on the Jogjakarta and Surakarta prolonging the Mataram legacy after 1755 under Dutch overlordship; see the genealogy in J.W. Winter, ‘Beknopte beschrijving van het Hof Soerakarta in 1824’, in G.P. Rouffaer (ed.), *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië*, 54 (1902), 15–172, at 26–7.

was eroded in the later eighteenth century but re-emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is more difficult to situate historically the Ogois kings of Benin, who, according to early sources, ruled 'in the olden days before there was any Moon or Sun'. The precise starting point of their Eweka successors, who ruled Benin as 'Obas' (kings) from the early thirteenth century into the modern age, cannot be established with much accuracy.<sup>16</sup>

There is a sound practical reason for choosing this period, one which witnessed the emergence of global networks, the expansion of literacy, and the large-scale production of printed books. Numerous texts written by missionaries, diplomats, merchants, soldiers, and travellers make it possible to include regions that generated few indigenous written sources, notably Africa and the Americas. Lacking the abundant written records of polities in Asia and Europe, the history of these territories has been painstakingly reconstructed on the basis of archaeological finds, indigenous scripts, and oral traditions. European travellers' reports offer invaluable supplementary material. The authors of these reports inevitably perceived the peoples and lands they encountered through the lens of European preoccupations. However, given that there are few alternative written sources, the problems involved in using them are outweighed by the benefit of including otherwise inaccessible territories in the following account. One of the questions raised by European sources of this period is that of 'commensurability': visitors straightforwardly translated their observations into European terminology. This draws attention to the way in which they recognised certain aspects, without necessarily proving actual similarities.<sup>17</sup> Modern researchers must therefore verify whether terms such as 'courtier' or 'noble' used in these texts correspond to the social categories of distant worlds. While I use sources generated by the global encounter, mutual perceptions and the transfer of peoples and artefacts between courts do not appear in my comparison.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See Dierk Lange, 'The kingdoms and peoples of Chad', in D.T. Niane (ed.), *General History of Africa*, vol. IV: *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA, 1984), 238–65; Donald E. Crummey, 'Ethiopia in the early modern period: Solomonic monarchy and Christianity', *Journal of Early Modern History*, 8/3 (2004), 191–209, and the literature cited there; Stefan Eisenhofer, 'The Benin kinglist/s: some questions of chronology', *History in Africa*, 24 (1997), 139–56.

<sup>17</sup> On encounters, translation, and 'commensurability', see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> I leave aside here the rich literature on the movement of people, ideas, artefacts, and germs, and the processes of cultural transfer; see e.g. Bhaswati Bhattacharya, Gita Dharampal-Frick, and Jos Gommans, 'Spatial and temporal continuities of merchant networks in South Asia and the Indian Ocean (1500–2000)', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 50/2–3 (2007), 91–105;



This book does not provide an overview of dynastic histories; it examines a number of examples, some consistently present, others varying per chapter. Three criteria determine the choice of examples: the availability of specialised studies, the spread over several continents with diverging traditions, and the presence of practices not found elsewhere. Repetitions of familiar patterns in yet another region are not necessarily included: I do not aim to provide a comprehensive encyclopaedic panorama. The most thoroughly documented courts of Europe and Asia comprise a substantial part of the following chapters. Since the 1980s, an increasing number of works have dealt with European courts, a world with which I have familiarised myself through previous archival research into the courts of the Valois and Bourbons in Paris-Versailles and the Austrian Habsburgs in Vienna.<sup>19</sup> In the last two decades, numerous important studies have appeared on the major courts and dynasties of Asia, from the Ottoman, the Mughal, and the Safavid dynasties, to the Ming and Qing courts, to Japan, with its intriguing form of ‘dual rulership’ comprising the shogun and the emperor.<sup>20</sup> The availability of these specialised works enables a comparative examination that establishes detail and variation before seeking generalisation. As far as possible, the voices of contemporaries have been included. The written legacies of Asian empires, particularly rich on the dynastic centre, have been used only when they were available in translation or through the interpretations of modern authors. The literature on rulers and courts in other parts of the globe is more sparse, and hence these regions appear only sporadically in this book – where sufficient materials were available and when cases raise interesting comparative questions. Examples from Africa, the Americas, Southeast Asia, and Oceania will appear in particular where they cast doubt on common generalisations, and where they extend the variation in the patterns examined. Unexpected and divergent cases stretch and test the comparative framework of this book. Matrilineal succession, for example, problematises categories that seem self-evident within the patrilineal context dominant in Europe and Asia, and thus helps to reframe questions and definitions.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *From Tagus to the Ganges: Explorations in Connected History* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Duindam, *Myths of Power*; Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles: The Courts of Europe's Dynastic Rivals, 1550–1780* (Cambridge, 2003); and Duindam, ‘Royal courts’, in Hamish Scott (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350–1750*, vol. II: *Cultures and Power* (forthcoming, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> See titles in the following chapters. While the literature on most European and Asian courts is concentrated on the centuries after around 1400, in Japan the phase before the rise of the shoguns in the twelfth century has attracted more attention.

Examples of African kingship complement European and Asian models of rulership in a significant way. The legacy of African kingship is rich and diverse, containing examples of matrilineal succession and female power, as well as notably sacralised forms of kingship. It also brings into focus the close relationship between kinship patterns and kingship, less easily discernible in more differentiated, larger-scale polities.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the inclusion of African kingship raises the question of whether scale and development are essential criteria.<sup>22</sup> Comparative political studies tend to examine polities they deem evenly matched in terms of population, surface, social stratification, modes of production, and political development. Alternatively, they rank the polities they study according to criteria related to scale and development. Scholars have labelled polities as empires, kingdoms, states, and chiefdoms. They elaborate typologies, differentiating 'ungoverned' and egalitarian societies from chiefdoms, chiefdoms from kingdoms or from early states, early states from mature states, and kingdoms from empires. These typologies and rankings do not enter into the criteria for my comparison. Any polity governed by a ruler surrounded by relatives and a body of servants qualifies. Only local chiefs nominated by or clearly subservient to a paramount chief do not fit into this picture; yet tributary polities paying homage to a more distant powerful leader do.

- <sup>21</sup> See a critique of evolutionist typologies of kinship-based groups and states in David Sneath, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia* (New York, 2007); Sneath points to the persistence of kinship ties in states and to the 'continuities and similarities in power structures within a single analytical frame' (195).
- <sup>22</sup> See Sneath, *Headless State*; George Peter Murdock, *Africa: Its Peoples and their Culture History* (New York, 1959), 33–9 and 144–5, presents a remarkable typology of 'African despotism' based on Karl Wittfogel's 1957 *Oriental Despotism*. Murdock denies the relevance of differences in scale (37); he presents a series of shared characteristics of 'African despotisms' (37–9), overstating the power of these kings but demonstrating the basis for comparison between African and Asian/European dynastic patterns. See further attempts at typology by Peter C. Lloyd, 'The political structure of African kingdoms: an explanatory model', in Michael Banton (ed.), *Political Systems and the Distribution of Power* (London, 1965), 63–112, and Aidan Southall, 'A critique of the typology of states and political systems' in the same volume, 113–40, including pertinent remarks about comparison. Related attempts at typology can be found in H.J.M. Claessen, *Van Vorsten en volken: een beschrijvende en functioneel-vergelijkende studie van de staatsorganisatie in vijf schriftloze vorstendommen* (Amsterdam, 1970), a comparison of scriptless societies; and H.J.M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik (eds.), *The Early State* (The Hague, 1978), and several follow-up volumes. See also H.J.M. Claessen, 'Kings, chiefs and officials: the political organization of Dahomey and Buganda compared', *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, 19/25–6 (1987), 203–41, who at 204 suggests a three-tiered dimension of power (king–intermediaries–local chiefs) as the key difference between a chiefdom and a state. More recently, see Michał Tymowski, *Early Imperial Formations in Africa and the Segmentation of Power* (Basingstoke, 2011).



Populations may reach hundreds of millions or only thousands; royals may live in thatched mud huts, mobile tent encampments, or extended and luxurious palace complexes. Rulers can be companionable figures or distant and revered icons; government can be based on direct contact and verbal communication or rely on paperwork and intermediaries. The four dimensions chosen for this comparison are relevant for all dynastic environments.

Disregarding these commonly accepted criteria entails the comparison of very different polities, but it helps differentiate between timeless topoi of dynastic power and specific temporal or cultural characteristics. Why compare the sophisticated Chinese court, with its long-standing literary tradition, elaborate government apparatus, and exceptional scale, to a minor African polity such as the Mamprusi kingdom of northern Ghana, with its small non-literate population? In both polities, the ruler held a markedly ritualised responsibility for harvests and weather, for the harmony of heaven and earth.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the troubled relationship between the ruler and his male relatives led to similar solutions in African kingdoms and in Tang, Ming, and Qing China.<sup>24</sup> How can these similarities between dynastic polities at the extremes of commonly accepted typologies of scale and development be explained? The inclusion of Africa not only helps to break down 'the false conceptual barriers dividing regions and cultures studied by separate groups of scholars', it also raises new questions.<sup>25</sup>

Powerful twentieth-century traditions of anthropological research relating to African kingship and succession rely on oral tradition and archaeology as well as on earlier Arabic and European written sources.<sup>26</sup> Research of the colonial or postcolonial periods

<sup>23</sup> See Susan Drucker-Brown, *Ritual Aspects of the Mamprusi Kingship* (Leiden and Cambridge, 1975); Evelyn S. Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley, CA, and London, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Tardits (ed.), *Princes & serviteurs*; Denis Twitchett, 'The T'ang imperial family', *Asia Major*, 7/2 (1994), 1–61; David M. Robinson, 'Princely courts of the Ming dynasty', *Ming Studies*, 65 (2012), 1–12, and other contributions to this volume; Rawski, *Last Emperors*, 96–126.

<sup>25</sup> Southall, 'Segmentary state', 52–82 (quotation on 82), an article with many important ideas, which seeks explanations partly in 'modes of production' and levels of development.

<sup>26</sup> For Africa, this study relies in particular on the generation of anthropologists from E.E. Evans-Pritchard and M. Fortes to Jack Goody and Audrey Richards, with important later works by many historians and anthropologists, among them Jan Vansina and Claude Tardits. Rich specialised literature and sources explain the presence of examples from Asante, Dahomey, Benin, Zande, Ethiopia, Congo, and, towards the southeast, Buganda and Bunyoro.

reconstructing precolonial king-lists and royal traditions cannot always connect specific dynastic practices to specific periods: nineteenth-century practices are accepted as reflecting, to some extent, earlier variants. By including such examples from Africa, I push the boundaries of the period under analysis. However, as in the case of Asian polities, I stop before the European presence evidently became the dominant political factor.

### **Beyond great debates and grand narratives**

The period 1300–1800 has convincingly been presented in terms of the gradual emergence of global networks and the concomitant ascendancy of European economic, military, and political hegemony. It witnessed the rise and fall of numerous imperial or royal houses across the globe. How does this book deal with the master narrative of the rise of the West, or, more broadly, with change over time? The following chapters, concerned with rulers, dynasties, courts, and realms, will not deal at length with any longer-term predefined historical developments. The common historical focus on the development of one region over time is replaced by a thematic, comparative, and anthropological perspective. It is not my intention to construct an unvarying model of dynastic power: I use the four dimensions of dynastic rule established here as a timeless framework that allows me to consider general patterns as well as variants in place and time. Specific changes in the ideals and practices of rulership, in the arrangements for succession and reproduction, in the treatment of dynastic kin, in the composition and functions of the court, and in the interaction with the population at large, will be registered and interpreted in a comparative context whenever possible. Where differences between regions appear to be consistent over time, a typology will be suggested. However, the main purpose of this study is to provide a framework that helps to understand dynastic rule in a global setting. This model of dynastic power moves comparison beyond the point of establishing similarities and differences. The overall framework suggests how divergent practices can be seen as part of the same pattern, while the detail brought together in each of the chapters underlines that striking similarities hide profound differences.

Only towards the end of the book, and as an afterthought rather than as a fundamental argument, shall I consider how this comparative framework fits longer-term developments, including the gradual consolidation of polities around the world as well as the changes related to modernisation and the rise of Europe. The conclusion will also consider cyclical views common among contemporaries. The prolific North African Arabic



writer Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), numerous Chinese authors, and, arguably, most other premodern political thinkers, viewed the gradual degeneration of dynastic power after the founding generation as inevitable, usually as a consequence of increasing luxury and declining moral fibre.<sup>27</sup> Their perception of repeated cycles of dynastic rise and decline, stripped of its moral overtones, remains relevant for the understanding of dynastic power. Can the tensions inherent in the dynastic set-up be understood as structural causes of an alternating cycle of ascent and decline? Change will thus be examined at three levels: within each of the four defined themes, as a cyclical or recurring pattern inherent in dynastic power, and as a long-term development.

Machiavelli, Montesquieu, and many other authors viewed the world as divided into two categories: free peoples with limited government and slave peoples subjected by all-powerful rulers. Despotic and capricious ‘palace polities’ in Asia served as a counterpoint to European-style monarchy.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, at times charges of ‘Oriental despotism’ were thrown at European princes to warn them against transgressing their legitimate boundaries. For the general public in our contemporary age, dynastic power in the East and the West first and foremost represents a pre-enlightened and pre-democratic past, a previous stage of human political development associated with privilege and suppression. These understandable general attitudes have predisposed numerous scholars to commence their research with anachronistic and prejudicial views of *ancien régime* monarchy in general, and of Asian empires in particular. This tendency can be detected in the choice of themes. While dynasty in Europe, as elsewhere, was indisputably the dominant form of power, republics have been studied eagerly as harbingers of a new age. The

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, ed. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 1967). In the Chinese context, see Peter Kees Bol, ‘The “localist turn” and “local identity” in later imperial China’, *Late Imperial China*, 24/2 (2003), 1–50; Frederic Wakeman, Jr, ‘The dynastic cycle’, in his *The Fall of Imperial China* (New York, 1977), 55–70. In Greek and Roman contexts, see Polybius, *The Histories*, ed. F.W. Walbank et al. (Cambridge, MA, 2011), III.5–8; G.W. Trompf, *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought: From Antiquity to the Reformation* (Berkeley, CA, and London, 1979). See Arnold Toynbee’s reinterpretation, *A Study of History* (various editions), and a comment in Robert Irwin, ‘Toynbee and Ibn Khaldun’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 33/3 (1997), 461–79; and general observations in Southall, ‘Segmentary state’, 77.

<sup>28</sup> In his admirable overview, Samuel E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times*, 3 vols. (Oxford and New York, 1997–9), refers to palace polities in many places, suggesting a structurally unstable pattern – a characteristic that Montesquieu and his contemporaries likewise connected to ‘oriental despotism’; see e.g. Thomas Kaiser, ‘The evil empire? The debate on Turkish despotism in eighteenth-century French political culture’, *Journal of Modern History*, 72/1 (2000), 6–34.

stepping-stones of democracy were carefully mapped, from Greek and Roman polities, via the rise of autonomous, urban centres in the European high middle ages, to the advent of representative institutions and popular sovereignty in the more recent European and American past. Even in monarchical settings, components surviving into present-day democracies such as representative assemblies, councils, and ministers, have received far more attention than the dynastic and courtly themes examined in this book.

In recent decades, historians have examined historic monarchies with more detachment, taking seriously the values of the period studied in addition to those of our own times. Two closely connected shifts engendered by this research are particularly important here for the way in which they open up comparative perspectives on European, African, and Asian forms of rulership: a new stress on the political relevance of the domestic environment of rulers, and a profound questioning of the 'absolute' power of rulers. In Europe, there has been a shift in attention from 'modern' state institutions and the sources generated by policy-making boards and councils to the social setting of dynastic power, the court. A closer look at state archives and private collections suggested that the domestic world around rulers stood at the heart of the early modern state. This was no 'gilded cage' captivating once powerful nobles through expensive luxury and endless squabbles, and allowing the state to develop without their interference.<sup>29</sup> In most European countries, high-placed nobles in domestic court offices retained political power, sometimes formalised and direct, sometimes through their proximity and intimacy with the ruler. While a role in the formalised part of the decision-making process was granted only to a small number of persons, numerous others could gain influence over the distribution of honours. Prominent noble courtiers were particularly well-placed here, but lesser-ranking staff might profit too. Anybody daily serving the prince or his relatives could hope to exert influence at some point; and many did so by carrying written petitions or verbally conveying requests. Repeated rulings against chamber servants acting as intermediaries suggest such actions were common and ineradicable. Nor was this often forgotten dimension of power necessarily male. Dynastic women, served by their own mixed female and male staffs, could formally rule in some or act as a regent in most countries. Outside of such conspicuous roles, they acted as patron

<sup>29</sup> See Duindam, *Myths of Power*; and Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*. For a similar and definitive assessment of France, see Leonhard Horowski, *Die Belagerung des Thrones: Machtstrukturen und Karrieremechanismen am Hof von Frankreich 1661–1789* (Stuttgart, 2012). On Vienna, see Andreas Pečar, *Die Ökonomie der Ehre: der höfische Adel am Kaiserhof Karls VI. (1711–1740)* (Darmstadt, 2003).



for the women on their staffs and as intermediary with the male ruler – whether spouse or son.<sup>30</sup>

If European monarchy also depended in part on the manipulations of palace staff, then how exactly did it differ from Asian ‘palace politics’? The presence of an expanding ‘bureaucratic’ state apparatus cannot be the answer. It has long since been accepted that in China administrative routines were particularly strong, and recent work underlines innovations introduced under the three successful ‘high Qing’ emperors Kangxi (1654–1661–1722), Yongzheng (1678–1722–1735), and Qianlong (1711–1735–1796\*<sup>31</sup>). West and South Asian empires, notably the Ottomans and the Mughals, building on the Persian traditions of kingship and administration, likewise developed administrative routines.<sup>32</sup> In all major European kingdoms, as well as in the greater empires of Asia, domestic staffs catering for the rulers; clerks, administrators, and advisors responsible for the machinery of government; and, finally, military elites were present at the heart of power. There is no straightforward contrast between an ‘East’ governed by palace cliques and a ‘West’ based on orderly procedure and government by paper. At court, the changing balances between different elites took shape: this ubiquitous process needs to be placed in an open, comparative perspective, rather than in a model which first and foremost seeks to explain the rise of Europe.

From the 1980s onwards, scholarship has questioned the omnipotence of absolute rulers in Europe.<sup>33</sup> ‘Absolutism’, an echo of royal propaganda and revolutionary discourse, survived into modern scholarship because of

<sup>30</sup> Katrin Keller, *Hofdamen: Amtsträgerinnen im Wiener Hofstaat des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna, 2005); Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben (eds.), *The Politics of Female Households: Ladies-in-Waiting across Early Modern Europe* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2013); Jan Hirschbiegel and Werner Paravicini (eds.), *Das Frauenzimmer: Die Frau bei Hofe in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Stuttgart, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> R. Kent Guy, *Qing Governors and their Provinces: The Evolution of Territorial Administration in China, 1644–1796* (Seattle, WA, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Rhoads Murphy, *Exploring Ottoman Sovereignty: Tradition, Image and Practice in the Ottoman Imperial Household, 1400–1800* (London and New York, 2008); J.F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1995), 58–78; see also Stephen P. Blake, ‘The patrimonial-bureaucratic empire of the Mughals’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 39 (1979), 77–94.

<sup>33</sup> See a parallel for Africa developed by John Beattie, ‘Checks on the abuse of political power in some African states: a preliminary framework for analysis’, in Ronald Cohen and John Middleton (eds.), *Comparative Political Systems: Studies in the Politics of Pre-Industrial Societies* (New York, 1967), 355–73, at 355: ‘older writers about primitive states in Africa and elsewhere often spoke of chiefs and kings as possessing absolute power. But it is plain from the more thorough ethnography of the past half century or so that in fact the authority of such rulers is generally restricted by a wide range of social institutions.’

a narrow reading of high-handed state rhetoric and decrees: sources underlining the initiative of the centre. In the last two decades, regional and non-state sources have drawn attention to the agency of local elites. Notwithstanding a deferential attitude and polite formulae, their responses to the centre show a clear political agenda. The language of hierarchy, service, and loyalty did not preclude bargaining for and the protection of regional interests. Co-operation was beneficial for both parties, and elite interests were buttressed by the state as long as the elites fitted willingly into the framework of monarchy.<sup>34</sup> From the 1650s onwards, after a century of frequent conflict and spiralling costs of warfare caused by religious dissent, a mixed power elite of nobles and new men occupying state offices held power in most countries both in the centre and the provinces. They formed the core of a state machinery that expanded its grip on society as a whole. Only in the second half of the eighteenth century, when a new round of military competition overstrained the fiscal and financial capabilities of the European belligerents, was this arrangement challenged again. The reforms engendered by this financial crisis severely tested the compact between privileged elites and the state, leading to widespread contestation in France as well as in several other states.

These changes in the study of European 'absolute' rulership, a consequence of the uncovering of new sources and the reinterpretation of familiar materials, raise the question of whether a similar reconsideration is possible in the case of 'autocratic' Chinese emperors, Ottoman sultans, and their fellow rulers elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> Can we find Asian parallels to the actions and goals of men and women serving European rulers? The impact of high office-holders such as Ottoman viziers or Chinese grand secretaries has never been questioned, and increasing numbers of

<sup>34</sup> As shown by the example of Burgundy and the Condé: Julian Swann, *Provincial Power and Absolute Monarchy: The Estates General of Burgundy, 1661–1790* (Cambridge, 2003); Katia Béguin, *Les princes de Condé: rebelles, courtisans et mécènes dans la France du grand siècle* (Paris, 1999); see also her 'Louis XIV et l'aristocratie: coup de majesté ou retour à la tradition?', *Histoire, économie et société*, 19/4 (2000), 497–512.

<sup>35</sup> A stress on the agency of localities and their interaction with the centre can be found in many recent works on Asian polities: see e.g. Michael Szonyi, *Practicing Kinship: Lineage and Descent in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA, 2002); or Ramya Sreenivasan, 'A South Asianist's response to Lieberman's *Strange Parallels*', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 70/4 (2011), 983–93, notably at 986–7 underlining the impact of recent archival work on the local contexts of dynastic power. See also the work of Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, 2010), and numerous articles by the same author, bringing into line European and Ottoman early modern political experiences. Charles Tilly, *Trust and Rule* (Cambridge, 2005), presents a model of connections between rulers, elites, and the populace, with a series of top-down and bottom-up strategies, stressing the 'predatory' nature of rulership.



publications on Asian courts point to the agency of court women, servants, and eunuchs.<sup>36</sup> It is not justified to apply unquestioningly conclusions reached in a European context to other worlds, but there is a clear shared problem here: the long-standing preponderance of sources conveying an image of central power and order. Palace architecture functioned in this way in the past and continues to do so in the present. The most readily available and extensive written sources for the study of dynastic power were produced by scribal elites serving the ruler and hence rarely strayed far from official views. The rich variety of local and private sources as well as the reports generated by numerous mutual diplomatic missions available for early modern Europe make it relatively easy to find alternative viewpoints. In China, the officially approved histories ('veritable records' or *shilu*) created by Chinese literati administrators, describing many issues in great detail, stressed the power of the emperor and the dignity of literati ministers, while they reported on inner court agents mostly in the context of abuse and decline. The more diverse chronicles on Ottoman, Mughal, or Safavid history stay within the bounds dictated by the proximity of the authors to the court and its leading elites. Recent work suggests that the archival repositories of the Qing court and the Topkapı palace, as well as unofficial and regional sources, will help to reopen the debate on the nature of sultanic and imperial power.<sup>37</sup>

This book cannot provide an expert's view on every single dynasty, nor does it unearth sources unknown to specialists. It is neither a vindication nor an indictment of dynasty. It brings together numerous contemporary witnesses of dynastic power and examines specialised studies. My bird's-eye view demonstrates which questions are inextricably linked with

<sup>36</sup> On eunuchs, see Jane Hathaway, *Beshir Agha: Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Imperial Harem* (London, 2005); Shaun Tougher, *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (London, 2002); Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (London, 2008); Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago, IL, 2003); Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty* (New York, 1996); Norman A. Kutcher, 'Unspoken collusions: the empowerment of Yuanming Yuan eunuchs in the Qianlong period', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 70/2 (2010), 449–95. On women, see the works cited in notes 5 and 30 above and in Chapter 2.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. the recent revision of the role of the Mongol legacy at the Ming court and the position of Ming princes, based in part on a rereading of the *shilu*, combined with regional sources and archaeology, in David M. Robinson (ed.), *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court (1368–1644)* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); Robinson, 'Princely courts of the Ming dynasty'; and Robinson, *Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court* (Cambridge, MA, 2013); or the combined reading of court and local sources in Michael G. Chang, 'Historical narratives of the Kangxi emperor's inaugural visit to Suzhou, 1684, in Jeroen Duindam and Sabine Dabringhaus (eds.), *The Dynastic Centre and the Provinces: Agents and Interactions* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2014), 203–24.

dynastic power and suggests how diverging responses can be understood. Authorities in particular fields may find slips or omissions, but they will be compensated by the unexpected insights that come with comparison: this book allows them to see how the courts and rulers they know so well fit into the global framework of dynastic power. Novices will discover a fascinating world with its own logic, one remarkably consistent throughout history. In the end they may recognise in our own age mechanisms and attitudes familiar from the dynastic past.