

Good example of essay on the yuan dynasty vs. the ming: contrasting representatio...

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People have always been distinguished by a sense of superiority and pride for when it comes to their origins, culture, and civilization, compared to others. That sense was, sometimes, intense even among those speaking the same language and sharing the same cultural background if there was something they felt was making them stand out. This paper will focus on two dynasties, the Yang and the Ming, and will present the contrasting attitudes they had for the others, based on the works of Lin Jing and Ma Huan.

The Yuan dynasty appears to be expressing Han-related behaviors towards “others” very differently, compared to the Ming dynasty. For example, people in the Yuan dynasty considered “others” rather uncivilized human beings with primitive instincts; like animals. This concept is clearly shown through Li Jing’s *Customs of Various Barbarians* while those in the Ming dynasty judged others less harshly. In fact, the Ming saw a particular interest in the others’ materials and food, adopting a more neutral attitude towards them. This could be attributed to the fact that the seven voyages that Zheng He did, allowed the empire to expand and start trading abroad, which, in turns led China’s material culture into a new era of wealth, elevating the interest to cultures outside China.

That being said; the Ming dynasty was not as ethnocentric as the Yuan, given that the governors of Ming were significantly more interested in the world outside China and overseas trading. The Yuan’s ethnocentric behaviors were showcased in Li Jing’s work, where Yuan people consider others barbarians, especially when taking into consideration the sexual practices, the clothes (including hairstyles), and the food that received more emphasis, compared to others characteristics. According to Jing, the three aforementioned

characteristics, especially the first one (sexual practices), “ served as a measure of civilization or barbarism” (88) which is why others were criticized by Jing as living in a barbaric lifestyle. The Yuan emperor and the Yuan people showed a particular desire to make others more humanized. In contrast, Jing appears to be giving the Bai People a more respectful description that was significantly lengthier than the Luoluo and the different kinds of Barbarians described in his work. The Bai People are presented to have accommodated to the Han Chinese customs, which is why Jing focused on their culture (e. g. burial customs and clothing) that shares much resemblances to the Han Chinese of the recent years.

The primitive characteristics of others were depicted in various ways. To begin with, Jing picked those living in Yunnan to rest his case. Their living conditions, which included the three already mentioned aspects of clothing, food, and sexual practices, were his focal points. The food was mentioned as “ raw” several times, while the Han Chinese food was “ cooked,” which showed the uncivilized eating habits of the others. Indicatively, Jing mentions “ Food is preferred raw; for example, pork, beef, chicken, and fish are all minced raw, mixed with garlic paste, and then eaten” (89). What is more, not only is the food they eat of poor quality -“ A year’s worth of food might half consist of turnips. The poor families know no other seasoning but salt.” (Jing 94)- but they also lack variety in their customs. It becomes apparent that Jing uses both the words raw and reduced quality to impose strict and severe criticism on the eating habits of the barbarians. The materials the Yunnan used, and the food they ate were presented as inferior.

When it comes to how others used to dress, the Han clothing was considered

to shape the social norm, from which the Yunnan were far apart, which, consequently, made them second-class people. Indicatively, Jing says that women went barefoot and that they “ looked like gibbons” (95), from a distance, when in and out of the forests. Furthermore, the sexual practices that the others performed and Jing reported in full detail, also contributed to the others being regarded as animalized. Virginity for the Han Chinese was taken as a measurement of barbarism or civilization and in Jing’s opinion the Yunnan people had an equally raw and savage view of sex just as they did with their food. There are several reports that describe how the others considered sex-related matters. For instance, it is reported that “ When their affection is mutual, they then go off in pairs to have sex, and only afterwards do they get married.” (Jing 89) and that there are no significant distinctions between family members and close relatives in marriage and “ There is not much importance attached to virginity, and they are as profligate as dogs and swine.” (Jing 92). Showcasing the three characteristics (food, clothes, and sexual practices), Jing depicts the ethnocentric attitude of the Ming people, who considered others savage and barbarians; people living in primitive ways and animal-like lifestyles.

On the contrary, Jing showed more respect towards those that had adopted a more Han-like lifestyle and customs. For example, the others’ noblemen (here, the Bai People) had adopted a dress code similar to the Han Chinese of the recent times and they also had similar customs. In Yunnan, Jing classified the noblemen an advanced-class group of individuals and treated them with more respect, mainly due to their appearance and lifestyle. For example, “ Their refined gentlemen are quite good at calligraphy, and they

follow the style of the Jin period” (Jing 90), which was considered a breakthrough that the Han culture had introduced. The word selection (“refined gentlemen”) is revealing Jing’s sense of identity and the emperor’s plans to make others more civilized and humanized. The local people had to be introduced to the humanized culture, and in order to do that, they had to improve their living conditions. The so-called civilizing project, the project that focused on improving the locals’ living conditions, was the political policy to rule Yunnan province and Jing is particularly affected by it, which shapes his opinion of Yuan people’s attitudes towards others.

Set that aside; the ethnocentric idea is not absent from Ma Huan’s work, and he says that the others had no chopsticks or spoons to eat (92), and the eating habits of others were still considered savage and primitive. At this point, both Jing and Ma Huan share the same idea in terms of the others’ eating patterns. Ma Huan also severely judged the dress code and mentions that they were bare feet, as a means to show the barbaric lifestyle they were living (the others). Furthermore, Ma Huan describes the people of the Chao-wa country as people with “ ugly and strange faces, tousled heads, and bare feet “(93). It seems that Ma Huan wanted to sound more neutral, which is probably why he did not use the word barbarian, even though his descriptions point at uncivilized and barbarous people, and some people of the land were also regarded rude.

In conclusion, it has become apparent that neither the political nor social changes that had occurred during the transition from Yuan dynasty to the Ming were able to change the prevailing ethnocentrism. It had elements in both dynasties. However, the political changes in the policies in the Ming

dynasty allowed people to think more outside the box and start adopting a more open-minded view of others. Unfortunately, the concept of others as depicted herein, through the works of Jing and Ma Huan, played a crucial role in the culture of the forthcoming dynasty, the Qing, where their central systems were to close the borders and shut themselves from the outside world. For the Qing dynasty, others were barbaric and uncivilized, underdeveloped one may say, despite the fact that there were civilizations outside of China that the Industrial Revolution had brought prosperity and development to them. This tendency to isolate China from the outside world has prevented the Qing people to embrace a more open-minded view of others.

Works Cited:

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