Review


The study of Byzantium in China began in the 1950s. Only a few papers, mainly translated from Russian, were published over the following decades. However, since the 1980s, Byzantine Studies in China has made great progress. Several books and papers from all over the world have been translated, and a certain number of works have been published in Chinese.¹ Some Chinese scholars of Byzantium have emerged, such as Zhiqiang Chen. The History of the Byzantine Empire is one of his representative works.

The book consists of three parts: introduction, text and appendix. Three parts in the introduction constitute a history of international Byzantine Studies, the history of Chinese Byzantine Studies and a basic knowledge of Byzantium. To the overseas reader, I think that the most important part is the second one, which occupies a large space.

In this part, Chen pointed out that in the 1950s, Chinese Byzantine Studies was seriously affected by the Soviet Union. “The achievements of the Soviet Union at that time were introduced to China one by one.”² On this basis, some scholars were able to complete a few papers. Overall, in this period, the opinions of Chinese scholars were mainly influenced by those of the Soviet Union.

However, in the past three decades, the research of world history in China has taken a new stage. With the progress of the whole society and increasing opportunities to communicate with other countries, more and more scholars have realised the importance of Byzantine Studies. In 1986, a paper, “We should pay more attention to the research of Byzantium”, was published in the periodical World History Studies³. From then on, “more papers about Byzantine history were published and more space in universities’ teaching

materials was devoted to Byzantine Studies”\(^4\). But at the beginning of this period, most papers “were mainly introductions about foreign scholars’ works, and not yet real research”\(^5\).

Next, with the deepening of research and the widening of view, there was a variety of results in China. For example, “some subjects that had been just stranded at the theoretical level were deepened into details”\(^6\). Chen takes the discussion about Iconoclasm as an example. Chen thought the discussion indicated that some Chinese scholars paid their attention to Byzantine religious problems. “With the widening of views, Chinese scholars broke through limitations of the past to notice Byzantine political history”\(^7\). More attention was paid to Byzantine religion, culture, and the communications between Byzantium and ancient China.

One development that Chen points out is that “Chinese scholars have noticed the continuity of Antiquity in Byzantine culture. They call this kind of continuity ‘tradition’ or ‘complex of Antiquity’. It can be seen that there was a classical style in Byzantine literary, historical, philosophical, architectural and cultural works”\(^8\). And many papers about it were published, like *The relation of Byzantine culture and Western*\(^9\) and so on.

Another remarkable change is the use of the comparative method. “It helps Chinese scholars to break through the restriction of area history”\(^10\). Scholars have compared some Byzantine issues with Western and Chinese historical problems, which makes Byzantine history no longer merely an area history in people’s eyes.

Next, Chen pointed out that there was also progress in the use of Byzantine historical materials. More and more Chinese scholars and students came to develop different language skills as they were travelling abroad for study. It is now possible that Chinese scholars can use first and second hand materials written in other languages effectively. At the same time, with the development of research on China’s ancient history, some relevant records also have come to light, such as the communications between China and Byzantium. In addition, a number of Byzantine coins have been found in China in recent years\(^11\), which provide new evidence for the fact of communications between China and Byzantium.

\(^4\) Chen, introduction, 15.
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Chen, introduction, 17.
\(^7\) Ibid., 18.
\(^8\) Ibid., 18-19.
\(^10\) Chen, introduction, 19.
Also, Chen lists some deficiencies about Byzantine Studies in China. For example, some content of papers are still not original. The use of historical materials is not sufficient enough. However, Chen believes that these problems will be solved. The future of Chinese Byzantine study is bright.

Above is the second part of the introduction of the book. In my opinion, it is the meaningful part for foreign readers, because Chen looked back on the history of Chinese Byzantine Studies and introduced its current situation. It is a short history of Chinese Byzantine Studies.

As to the text of the book, it consists of ten chapters. Chapters One to Eight are arranged by chronology, whose names are “the time of Constantine”, “the time of Justinian” and so on. Chapter Nine is “Byzantine culture” and the last one is “Byzantine diplomacy”.

As to the reason for the decline of Byzantium, Chen’s idea neither is wedded to economic determinism, which affected the Chinese history for a long time, nor “the decline of military, culture or cities” that is argued by some western scholars. Chen believes that the reason is not a simple one, just as he thinks Iconoclasm is not just a religious issue. In my opinion, some of Chen’ arguments are relatively fair, as another scholar, Dr. Yin Zhonghai said: “This is the advantage that Chinese scholars bring to Byzantine Studies, because they can avoid the subjectivity that may be produced by realistic political and religious intentions which can influence some Western scholars’ ideas”.

As to the deficiencies of the book, I think the content and the style of it is a little outdated. As Alice-Mary Talbot said, “Since about 1970, there has been a pronounced shift in Byzantine studies away from political and diplomatic history to a much greater focus on social, cultural, economic, and military history”13. To this view, the book’s style is a little old-fashioned, but it is still a representative work of Chinese Byzantine Studies.

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