

perhaps this could be

extended and used for

an essay on how to compare

### Citizens without Nations – Comparative History

#### Mid-Term

urban in history?

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Course: Comparing and Connecting (5774LME05W)

The book *Citizens without Nations* by Marteen Prak presents the central thesis that public life was present in the Middle Ages through citizen interaction with structures of power, mainly through guilds. Prak adopts the comparative method for his work. The first and second sections deal with Europe, looking at specific countries while the third section discusses Asia.<sup>1</sup> The comparison, however, does a disservice to the territories he analyses. He devotes two thirds of the book, about 200 pages, to discussing Europe. Prak dedicates the time to trace guilds in Europe through time and discuss cases throughout European cities. However, for Asia, he discusses it in only 23 pages. In addition, the comparison is framed through the Western perspective. One needs to only look at the sub headers of the China section to notice that Prak does not explore institutions on their own, fitting them into western conceptions. Various issues stem from this perspective, among them the fact China is a huge swath of territory and therefore subject to variation. While Prak acknowledges this pitfall of his research, there is no attempt to compensate for it.<sup>2</sup> A clear example of this is the comparison with guilds. The use of the term guilds is western and was only introduced in the nineteenth century by foreign authors.<sup>3</sup> Even its Chinese equivalent *hanghui* obfuscates matters.<sup>4</sup> Adding to this terminological issue, Prak discusses guilds in both towns and cities in his European section. However, for China he makes no distinction between rural and urban areas, presuming uniformity in their functions. Contrary to this notion, *hanghui* varied depending on location. The *hanghui* in Beijing acted as hostels and coordination centers for those who stayed in Beijing while in Sichuan they dealt with immigration from other provinces.<sup>5</sup> This distinction between urban and rural is particularly important in China's case since the country took a long time to urbanize.<sup>6</sup> Prak discusses in the European section the importance of religion for guilds;<sup>7</sup> but when

a bit unclear  
needs more explanation

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<sup>1</sup> (Prak 2018, 21)

<sup>2</sup> (Prak 2018, 249)

<sup>3</sup> (Moll-Murata 2008, 214)

<sup>4</sup> The term *hanghui* was not used by contemporaries and points over trade and craft associations. There is a whole terminological issue that Prak ignores. See *Moll-Murata 2008* for further discussion. For this essay the term *hanghui* will be used, taking into account that variation exists.

<sup>5</sup> (Moll-Murata 2008, 215)

<sup>6</sup> (Friedmann 2007, 261)

<sup>7</sup> (Prak 2018, 109)



discussing Chinese guilds there is no mention of religion within guilds. However, home-deities and native-place sentiment was essential for establishing a guild in China.<sup>8</sup> This essay uses China as an example, nevertheless Prak also discusses the Ottoman Empire, which varied through time and covers a huge landmass. Variations are bound to exist.

Essentially the comparison Prak engages in suffers from asymmetry.<sup>9</sup>

Another issue with Prak's work is his use of diachronic analysis. As a result there are two main issues: Firstly, terms evolve and change with time, and the two main terms citizenship and guilds are not treated equally. When discussing citizenship, Prak ties it to the legal meaning, which gave people rights and responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> In the beginning chapter he acknowledges variation among countries. However, he presumes the legal definition, as well as the acquisition process as static. In contrast to his treatment of citizenship, he traces guilds and their evolution repeatedly throughout the text.<sup>11</sup> Since guilds and citizenship are tied together,<sup>12</sup> overlooking the evolution of one of these terms creates a gap in analysis. *choice?*

The second issue is narrativization, which is highlighted in the second section. In it, Prak asserts he engages in variation-finding comparison.<sup>13</sup> Variation-finding comparison presents a singular phenomenon with different cases understood as variation of that phenomena.<sup>14</sup>

The phenomenon Prak wants to study is why identical local institutions in different countries did not produce the same beneficial results for political freedom.<sup>15</sup> He attributes civic representation within institutions as a cause.<sup>15</sup> However, Prak goes on to simply narrativize and engage in descriptive work. There is little to no comparison between the countries analyzed. Prak, for this section, would have benefited from adopting a less rigid delineation between countries and organizing the section based on the different institutions across countries.

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<sup>8</sup> (Friedmann 2007, 263)

<sup>9</sup> (Kocka 2009, 17)

<sup>10</sup> (Prak 2018, 33)

<sup>11</sup> See (Prak 2018, 87)

<sup>12</sup> (Prak 2018, 28)

<sup>13</sup> (Prak 2018, 15)

<sup>14</sup> (Berger 2003, 16)

<sup>15</sup> (Prak 2018, 161)



Prak's work is highly informative. The sections where Prak discusses guilds and their roles within civil society and governments provide an interesting view, presenting power separate from the state. This perspective is especially important in the middle-ages and early modern history, since the modern state evolved and changed throughout this period. Prak's goals are highly ambitious. However, his attempt at global history unfortunately follows a trend which attempt to fit Asia into western criteria. In his ambition to present a diachronic approach which acknowledges change through time he falls short of his goals by engaging in narrativization.

this in on the whole to the point—  
however, you could have noted  
that prak tries to prevent  
what in the end still seems to  
be the result; it is his intention  
to downgrade Europe and  
modern exceptionalism. So  
a somewhat more balanced  
approach, ... — where are  
his attempts to some extent  
successful where does he

would have been useful.  
asymmetry-trap, would fall into the

## Sources

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