



*Dynasties:
A Global History of Power,
1300-1800*

Jeroen Duindam

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016

Review by: Derek R. Whaley

Dynasties: A Global History of Power, 1300-1800. By Jeroen Duindam.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN: 989-1-107-06068-0.
xx + 384 pp. £18.99.

Dynasticism is a difficult topic for even the most accomplished scholar to tackle. Its nuances vary by political and physical geography, culture and religion, governmental structure, societal expectations and time itself. Jeroen Duindam forges ahead, despite the staggering breadth of this context, and seeks to compare the myriad dynasties across the globe to find common ground among them. Although the title of his book implies a specific time span of 1300 to 1800, Duindam often explores beyond these periods in search of similarities, even while most of his arguments remain most solidly grounded in the seventeenth century. His extensive footnotes, supplemented with full-colour images, maps and figures, help contextualise and visualise his conclusions. In addition, a thorough glossary of relevant terms, an expansive bibliography that showcases his range of sources and a detailed index all help the reader to navigate this sometimes confusing material.

The volume is organised into four dense chapters, bookended by a substantial introduction and conclusion. A concentric circle chart in the introduction (5) visually represents the basic organisation of Duindam's argument, showing the ruler at the centre, surrounded by the dynasty, encapsulated by the court, which is enveloped by the realm. This graphic, however, also highlights the one major flaw in this work: dynasties are simply an element of the argument, not the overarching theme. Indeed, dynasticism itself is rarely focused upon throughout his study; instead, the author directs his attention to the specific day-to-day life of the ruler, the royal court and the governance of the realm, often spending significant space on issues that either relate little to dynasties in general or that transcend dynastic breaks. Thus, his title is somewhat misleading. The global breadth of the study is also in doubt, partially because there simply is not enough available evidence—in the Americas and Africa especially—and partially because Duindam is acutely interested in the machinery of Eastern monarchies, especially that of Ming and Qing China. For Europe, which is usually the baseline for any study on monarchism, the author only focuses substantially on the Austrian Habsburgs and the court of Louis XIV of France, leaving most other European monarchies as little more than casual examples. His study should be seen, therefore, as a series of well-constructed comparisons between the machinery of Far Eastern monarchies and other dynastic polities dispersed around the world.

The study begins by examining the role of the ruler in a monarchical government through an extensive examination of the characteristics of an ideal king. In this, Duindam draws attention to how European monarchies embraced religion, morality and justice as the basis of their ideal. Similarly, the Islamic states of Western Asia merged together Greek and Persian elements to emphasise justice-based governance where the monarch ruled by example. Both of these examples contrast with the duty-bound Confucian approach to kingship practiced by China and other East Asian monarchies, which also integrated aspects of Daoism and Buddhism. Despite these ideals, the kings rarely met such idealistic standards. The author moves from here to discuss the life of a monarch from birth to death, focusing on mentors, teachers, spouses, children and councillors, and how they each helped craft the individual into the regnal persona they eventually adopted. He supplies dozens of examples from across the world for his comparisons here and it is in these moments that Duindam appears as a comparative historian demonstrating his craft. The first chapter's conclusion, that dynastic monarchs only had a few good years in them after youth, before old age began to deprive them of their faculties, is thoroughly demonstrated.

His second chapter is the one most linked to the premise of his book's title, but here he deviates almost immediately. In discussing dynasticism, Duindam begins by considering the role of procreation and sibling rivalry, which quickly turns toward the role of women. He describes how women, be they wives, mothers, or daughters, often hold significant power as regents and consorts despite rarely holding the regnant title. He uses dynastic marriages, specifically, to bring in comparisons to African matrilineal dynasties, which are otherwise quite different from anything found in Eurasia or the Americas. This then diverts to the matter of concubinage and harems, which are uniquely absent from European courts. Rather fluidly, the narrative flows to the matter of succession and the role both women and princes play in the king-making process. Interesting in its rather organic pacing, this chapter nevertheless feels less about dynasticism and more about succession and the role people play in it.

Duindam's interest in Eastern monarchies becomes most pronounced in the final two chapters, which focus on the broader concepts of the court and the realm. The author compares the static courts of Early Modern Europe and Africa to the still itinerant courts of the Asian Steppe principalities to the secretive courts of the Far Eastern monarchs. He focuses extensively on the physical structures of these courts, including diagrams to describe the inner and outer courts and how they functioned in different polities. He then goes on to compare the different types of people employed by the monarchs for their courts and the vast disparities between their ranks and functions.

Concluding this chapter, the author looks at three courtly archetypes—the glorious dynastic temple, the gilded cage of the nobility and the arena of competition—to emphasise the level of involvement the ruler maintained in courtly life.

The topic of the realm is in many ways a continuation of the previous chapter in that those in the kingdom who benefited the most did so because of their interaction with the court. Although Duindam discusses active agents of the king outside the court, one cannot deny their general fluidity into and out of the court. Similarly, his discussion of the meritocracy that underlies all monarchies seems equally a part of the previous chapter, while the ranking systems he describes readily transcend ideas presented in the previous two chapters. Only his final two sections, that of power and pageantry, and his discussion on the transference of court culture into the popular culture, really hit on this chapter's core theme, but neither especially touch on dynasticism. For the former, Duindam presents a number of examples of monarchs interacting with the public in ways that emphasise their majesty and legitimacy, while in the latter he elaborates on how the people generally respected and idolised their monarchs, despite their flaws.

Ultimately, what Duindam presents in this book is a number of insightful comparisons between a selection of world monarchs of the Early Modern era. What he does not give his readers is a history of global dynasticism between 1300 and 1800. Elements of that concept certainly exist, but the bulk of this study compares monarchical power across the world removed from its dynastic context. Nonetheless, Duindam has produced a ground-breaking work that emphasises the similarities among the monarchies of the Early Modern world before the French Revolution and colonialism began monarchy's final descent into Modernity.

DEREK R. WHALEY
University of Canterbury