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**PRELIMINARY STUDY ON COMPARISONS BETWEEN
LATE BYZANTINE PALAIOLOGOS RENAISSANCE
(13-15 CENTURIES) AND THE RENAISSANCE DURING
SONG AND YUAN DYNASTIES IN CHINESE EMPIRE
(10 – 14 CENTURIES)**

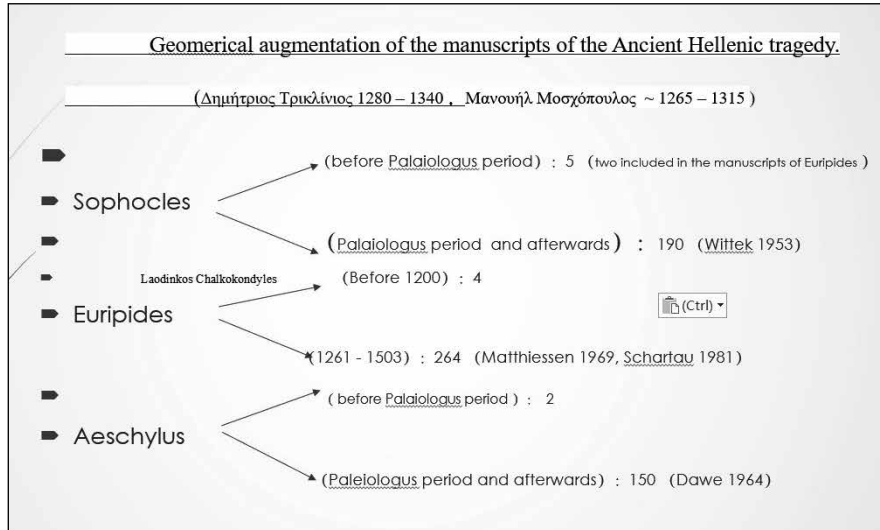
Abstract: Some scholars, such as Edmond Fryde, describe the final period of the Eastern Roman Empire (13th–15th centuries) as the Palaiologan Renaissance. Similarly, scholars like the Japanese historian Miyazaki Ichisada argue that China experienced a comparable cultural transformation during the Song Dynasty (10th–13th centuries), which we could extend into the Yuan Dynasty (13th–14th centuries) as a continuation of Song cultural developments. This paper aims to explore the convergences and divergences between the Palaiologan Renaissance and the cultural revitalization of the Song and Yuan periods within the broader context of the late medieval transformation. Our objective is to demonstrate that, despite their geopolitical and cultural differences, both the Byzantine and Chinese empires experienced periods of cultural transmission and revival rooted in the legacy of ancient traditions.

Keywords: Palaiologos Renaissance, Song and Yuan Renaissance, Late medieval Eurasia, cultural comparisons, late Byzantium.

Despite the continual decadence in late byzantine periode, Byzantine empire underwent a period of great cultural creativity and prosperity, specially during the Palaiologus period (1261 – 1453). Some scholars, such as Edmond Fryde, have referred to this era as the «Palaiologan Renaissance»¹. Interestingly, on the other side of Eurasian continent, Chinese Empire during Song and Yuan dynasty (10 – 14 centuries) also witnessed a period of cultural flourishing, that Japanese scholar of Kyoto historical school Miyazaki Ichisada (宮崎市定) qualifies as Song Renaissance (10th–13th centuries)², which we could

¹ Cf. E. FRYDE, *The Early Palaeologan Renaissance (1261- c.1360)*, Leiden, 2000, *The medieval Mediterranean*, volume. 27.

² Cf. Miyazaki Ichisada (宮崎市定), *The Renaissance in Eastern Asia and the Renaissance in Western Europe* (東洋のルネサンスと西洋のルネサンス), in *Complete*



eventually extend to Yuan dynasty (13th–14th centuries). The periods of the two so called Renaissances are almost identical if we date back the Palaiologan Renaissance to Nicean Renaissance or even to Macedonian Renaissance and also consider the posterior influence of Song and Yuan Renaissance in China.

In this paper, our objective is to explore the similarities and differences between the Palaiologan Renaissance and the cultural renovation of the Song and Yuan periods in considering the larger context of the late medieval transformation of Eurasian landscape. we will firstly summarize the main characteristics and the achievements respectively the Palaiologos Renaissance and Song and Yuan Renaissance before making the parallel comparisons between the two Renaissances and the conclusionary points.

I The Palaiologos Renaissance

Although the Palaiologan period was marked by political decline and internal as well as external crises, it was also a time of significant religious and cultural flourishing, whose influence extended well beyond the borders of the Eastern Roman Empire.

When referring to the «Palaiologan Renaissance,» the term can be understood in a broader sense to include regions beyond the direct rule of the Palaiologos dynasty—areas that inherited and continued Byzantine cultural traditions—such as the Empire of Trebizond, the Despotate of Epirus, and even Crete under Venetian domination. We will examine successively the different domains of Palaiologan Renaissance, namely the literature, philosophy and theology and historical works.

works of Miyazaki Ichisada (宮崎市定全集), Volume 19, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten (岩波書店), 1992.

A Literature

One of the defining characteristics of the Palaiologan Renaissance was the revival of classical learning, as many scholars engaged in the editing and study of ancient Greek texts—particularly works of poetry, tragedy, and comedy. Notably, most of the extant manuscripts of Greek tragedies that we possess today were copied during the Palaiologan period³. The fact should be manifested by the statistics of the existing manuscripts of ancient Greek tragic writers before and after 1300 year.

Image I The manuscripts of main ancient Greek tragic writers

Another important feature of Palaiologan-period literature is the development of a vibrant vernacular tradition⁴. Although Atticism and learned Koine remained influential in the late Eastern Roman Empire, a significant number of works were composed in the spoken Greek of the time. These vernacular romances mark a decisive stage in the evolution of the Greek language. In many respects, the medieval Greek used in Byzantine vernacular literature anticipates the structures and vocabulary of Modern Greek, making this period a crucial link in the language's historical development.

B Philosophy and theology

Another key characteristic of the Palaiologan Renaissance was the revival of Neoplatonism. While the primary philosophical curriculum in the Byzantine Empire traditionally emphasized works from the Aristotelian corpus—particularly in the domains of logic and rhetoric—Neoplatonic thought continued to circulate within humanist circles. Figures such as Michael Psellos and John Italus played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting this tradition. Moreover, even the Byzantine understanding of Aristotelian philosophy was deeply shaped by Neoplatonic commentaries, notably those of Porphyry and Simplicius. Nevertheless, Neoplatonism was often viewed with suspicion by both ecclesiastical and imperial authorities, due to its perceived incompatibility with Christian doctrine. The culmination of this Neoplatonic revival can be seen in the School of Mistra, led by Gemistos Plethon, who went so far as to advocate for a revival of a universal pagan religion modeled on ancient Hellenic teachings⁵.

It is important to note that during the so-called „Palaiologan Renaissance,“ not only did humanism—rooted in the legacy of ancient Greco-Roman culture—flourish, but Orthodox Christianity also experienced significant development, particularly through the hesychast movement. The relationship between humanism and Christianity during the Palaiologan era was complex. On one

³ The following table is made by the author with reference to E. FRYDE *The Early Palaeologan Renaissance (1261- c.1360)* , 2000, 149 – 152.

⁴ Cf. R. CANTARELLA, *Poeti Bizantini*, a cura di F. CONCA, Volume Primo, Milano, 2000, 44 – 45.

⁵ For the general introduction of the School of Mistra, cf. F. MASAI , *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, Paris, 1956.

hand, tensions emerged, especially during the hesychast controversy, where many critics of hesychasm and of Gregory Palamas's theology were humanist scholars—such as Nikephoros Gregoras—or monks heavily influenced by humanist thought, like Barlaam of Calabria and Gregory Akindynos⁶. On the other hand, some humanists made notable contributions to ecclesiastical life: for example, Theodore Metochites, who oversaw the reconstruction of the famous Church of Chora in Constantinople, and Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos, who supported both humanist learning and the hesychast movement. Moreover, although Gregory Palamas was generally critical of humanism, he nevertheless employed philosophical methods and terminology—such as *ousia* and *energeia*—in his theological defense of hesychasm, drawing on the philosophical tradition while remaining firmly rooted in the framework of Orthodox theology⁷.

C Historical works

The Palaiologan dynasty also marks a flourishing period for various forms of historical writing. Many humanists produced notable general histories, including George Pachymeres (1242–1310)⁸, Nikephoros Gregoras (1295–1360)⁹, and the emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (1292–1383)¹⁰.

A particularly distinctive contribution to late Byzantine historiography comes from Laonikos Chalkokondyles (c. 1430–c. 1470), an Athenian historian writing at the end of the Palaiologan period and under early Ottoman rule. As an observer of the Eastern Roman Empire's gradual decline and eventual fall, as well as the rise of Ottoman power, Chalkokondyles sought to compose a new kind of universal history inspired by Herodotus. His narrative places the emergence of the Ottoman Empire at its center, while also incorporating descriptions of the customs and histories of various regions known during the late medieval period.

Although his work contains many inaccuracies—largely because he relied heavily on rumors and secondhand reports—Chalkokondyles' history offers a

⁶ Cf. J. MEYENDORFF, *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas*, Paris, 1959, *Patristia Sorbonensia*, 3, 141–153.

⁷ The Phd thesis of author *Les rapports entre théologie et philosophie dans l'œuvre de saint Grégoire Palamas. Questions de méthodologie*, submitted to Theological School of Athens University analyses systematically the relationship between the theological works of Palamas and ancient greek philosophy.

⁸ Cf. GÉORGES PACHYMÈRE, *Relations historiques*, edition, introduction and notes by A. FAILLER, french translation by V. LAURENT, Paris, I., 1984, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* volumen XXIV/ 1, II., 1984, volumen XXIV/2, III, 1999, volumen XXIV/3, IV, 1999, volumen XXIV/4. V. 2000, Volumen XXIV/5

⁹ Cf. NICEPHORUS GREGORAS, *Historia Byzantiae*, cura Ludovicus Schopenus, Bonna, Volumen I 1829, *Corpus Scriptorum Historum Byzantinae* 38, Volumen II, consilio B. G. NIEBUHRII C. F. 1830, *Corpus Scriptorum Historum Byzantinae* 39, Volume III, consilio B. G. Niebuhrii C. F., 1855, *Corpus Scriptorum Historum Byzantinae* 40 ; *Patrologia Graeca* 148, 149, Migne (ed.), Migne, Paris 1865.

¹⁰ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. Migne, Paris, 1857 – 1866, volumen 153, volumen 154.

valuable picture of the international landscape of the late medieval Eurasian world and the interconnections among its diverse regions. In this sense, his work can be seen as a precursor to certain forms of global history¹¹.

II The Renaissance during Song and Yuan dynasties

Similar to the Palaiologan Renaissance, some scholars—such as the Japanese historian Naitō Torajirō (内藤湖南 1966 - 1934), one of the founders of the famous Kyoto historical school—have argued that China underwent a significant social and cultural transformation during the Song Dynasty (10th–13th centuries), marking the transition from a medieval to an early modern society¹². This period of transformation can, to some extent, be seen as continuing into the Yuan Dynasty (13th–14th centuries), despite the dramatic political shift brought about by Mongol rule. Miyazaki Ichisada (宮崎市定), a disciple of Naitō Torajirō, further developed Naitō's theory regarding the transformation of Chinese society during the Song dynasty toward forms of early modernity. He also attempted to apply the concept of a “Western Renaissance” to China, arguing that the Song era represented a kind of Chinese Renaissance¹³. This long process of social and cultural transformation can, to some extent, be seen as continuing into the Yuan dynasty (13th–14th centuries), despite the profound political changes introduced by Mongol rule. The Yuan Dynasty, while altering the administrative and political structures of the Chinese Empire, also preserved and extended many of the cultural developments initiated during the Song period¹⁴.

As a preliminary remark, it is important to note that when referring to the Song Dynasty, we must also consider that China was not politically unified during this period. Alongside the Song, several other states founded by northern and western nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples coexisted, most notably the Liao, Jin, and Western Xia dynasties. This Renaissance in late medieval China includes altogether the economic, cultural and scientific dimension, but we focus on the cultural development in our paper.

A Literature

Similar to the late Byzantine period, the Song and Yuan dynasties were also eras in which vernacular literature experienced significant development.

¹¹ Cf. LAONIKOS CHALKOKONDYLES, *The histories*, Volume I, Books 1-5, translated by A. Kaldellis, Harvard, 2014, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 33.

¹² NAITŌ TORAJIRŌ (内藤湖南): Overview of the period of world view of Tang and Song dynasty(概括的唐宋時代觀), in *History and Geography (歴史と地理)*, 9, (Japon 1922).

¹³ Cf. n. 2.

¹⁴ Some scholars also consider Song and Yuan dynasty like a whole, for exemple, WANG RUILAI (王瑞来), *Intelligentsia wents to the civil society*, A brief survey of the Song-Yuan transition (士人走向民间, 宋元变革与社会转型), GuiLin, 2023.

During the Song dynasty, *ci* (词), a form of lyric poetry composed to musical tunes, reached a high level of refinement and popularity. In the Yuan dynasty, *qu* (曲)—songs with a wider variety of melodies—flourished, accompanied by the rise of *zaju* (杂剧) theatre. Together, these developments reflect a broader cultural shift toward literary forms rooted in spoken language and popular performance traditions.

B Philosophy and religions

Although the intellectual tendency we now refer to as “Neo-Confucianism” (理學) can be traced back to the late Tang Dynasty—with key figures such as Han Yu (韩愈) and Li Ao (李翱)—it was only during the Song Dynasty that scholars began to systematically combine classical exegesis with the development of new, coherent philosophical frameworks grounded in the Confucianist tradition, not without of Buddhist and Taoist influences, even if in general the neo-confucianists have rather a negative attitude towards Buddhism and Daoism and criticised them as “haeresies (异端)”, in opposition to confucianism. This synthesis marked a significant evolution in Confucianist thought. In contrast, during the Tang Dynasty, the roles of classical commentators and philosophers were generally separate: scholars who interpreted the Confucianist classics were typically distinct from those who developed independent philosophical doctrines. In late South Song dynasty and in Ming dynasty, the school of Zhu Xi (朱熹), one branch of neo-Confucianism had been recognised as orthodox interpretation of confucianist tradition and the ancient classics. And this recognition of the school of Zhu Xi continued until the end of Chinese Empire in 1912 with the fall of Manchurian dynasty Qing.

During the Song and Yuan dynasties, we can observe parallel developments in both Daoism and Buddhism. On one hand, efforts to compile and preserve complete canonical collections were actively pursued, often with the support of imperial authorities. For example, the *Treasury of Xuandu* (玄都寶藏), a Daoist canon compiled during the Yuan dynasty, was based on earlier collections from the Northern Song and expanded during the Jin dynasty¹⁵. However, this collection was ultimately lost due to the anti-Daoist policies of Kublai Khan¹⁶. In the case of Buddhism, the compilation of the *Tripitaka*—the Buddhist canon—advanced significantly during the Song and Liao dynasties, not only in Chinese but also in Tibetan and Tangut languages¹⁷.

While the Tang dynasty is often regarded as the apogee of Daoism and Buddhism due to strong imperial patronage, it was during the Song dynasty that both traditions became more deeply integrated into civil society. Compared to the Tang period, when religious institutions were heavily dependent on state

¹⁵ Cf. Luo Weiguo (罗伟国): *The Bouddhist Canons and the Taoist Canons*. (佛藏与道藏), Shanghai 2014, 207 – 211.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 211.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 78 – 96.

support, the Song era witnessed a broader diffusion of Buddhist and Daoist practices among the literati and common people alike, reflecting a shift toward more socially embedded forms of religious life.

C Historical works

Parallel to developments in the Eastern Roman Empire, historical literature also blossomed during the Song and Yuan periods. One of the major historical achievements of the Song era is the *Zizhi Tongjian* (资治通鉴, “Mirror for Aid in Government”), a massive chronicle compiled under the direction of the scholar-official and statesman Sima Guang (司马光). Covering more than a millennium of Chinese history—from 403 BC to AD 959 — the *Zizhi Tongjian* was conceived as a continuation of the ancient *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋), one of the ancient classics, which ends precisely in 403 BC. In this sense, Sima Guang’s work deliberately positioned itself as the successor to the classical annalistic tradition.

III Comparisons between Palaiologus Renaissance and Song and Yuan Renaissance

We can identify several common features between the Palaiologan Renaissance in Byzantium and the cultural revival during the Song and Yuan dynasties in China. First, both civilizations witnessed a large-scale effort to edit, preserve, and comment upon classical texts. In the Byzantine Empire, humanist scholars focused primarily on the Greek and Roman literary and philosophical heritage, while in Song and Yuan China, similar editorial and compilation efforts were directed toward the Confucian classics as well as the Buddhist and Daoist canons.

Second, both the Palaiologan Byzantine Empire and Song-Yuan China experienced significant social transformations that coincided with cultural revivals rooted in ancient traditions. Although these empires did not maintain direct contact during this period, their parallel developments can be situated within the broader context of the late medieval transformation across Eurasia. Similar cultural shifts occurred in the Islamic world—for instance, in the Persian Ilkhanate—as well as in Western Europe, which saw the beginnings of the Renaissance. These synchronous changes across regions suggest a larger Eurasian transition from the medieval to the early modern world. The expansion of the Mongol Empire, despite its destructive aspects, played a crucial role in connecting distant parts of Eurasia, facilitating exchanges of ideas, texts, and technologies. This increased connectivity laid the groundwork for the global transformations that continued with the expansion of the Western world in the early modern period. There were also similar internal dynamics at work. Both the Eastern Roman Empire and late medieval Chinese empires sought to reaffirm their cultural identities through a revitalization of their respective traditions. For Byzantium, confronted with the growing Ottoman threat, cultural authority became one of the few remaining means of preserving its primacy within

the Orthodox world. Likewise, the Song dynasty needed to assert its orthodox status within the broader Chinese cultural sphere by demonstrating its cultural superiority in the face of competing “barbarian” states on its frontiers.

At the same time, conqueror dynasties such as the Jin and the Yuan—though considered “barbarian” in the traditional Chinese worldview—also embraced Chinese cultural traditions, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, to strengthen their legitimacy as rulers over the Chinese heartland.

Thus, in the late medieval period, advanced and mature societies often turned to their own classical traditions for inspiration, creatively reinterpreting them in order to respond to new social and political circumstances brought about by periods of transition.

Third, both the Byzantine and Chinese worlds experienced tensions between classical authority and religious orthodoxy. In the Palaiologan context, conflicts emerged between developing humanist trends and Christian theology, particularly in the hesychast controversy. As previously noted, however, the reality was often more nuanced, with figures navigating both domains. A similar dynamic appeared in China, where scholarly efforts to assert classical authority were sometimes in tension with established religious traditions, that is to say Buddhism and Daoism, though often integrated into broader spiritual and moral frameworks.

Fourth and finally, both the Palaiologan and Chinese cultural renaissances had lasting impacts on later historical developments. The Palaiologan Renaissance directly influenced the rise of humanism and the Italian Renaissance, particularly through the transmission of Greek philosophical texts and the founding of institutions like the Neoplatonic Academy in Florence. Meanwhile, in China, the school of Zhu Xi—one of the leading currents of Neo-Confucianism—was officially recognized as the orthodox interpretation of Confucianism by the Southern Song court and later adopted by the Yuan dynasty as the basis for the imperial examination system, thus shaping the ideological foundations of the imperial bureaucracy for centuries.

Similarly, in Song and Yuan China, the relationship between Neo-Confucianism and the dominant religious traditions—Buddhism and Daoism—was complex. On one hand, Neo-Confucian scholars appealed to the authority of classical Confucian texts and often positioned their interpretations in explicit opposition to Buddhist and Daoist doctrines, criticizing them for their perceived otherworldliness or metaphysical excesses. On the other hand, these same scholars also drew significantly from Buddhist and Daoist thought, incorporating elements such as meditation practices, metaphysical frameworks, and cosmological insights to enrich the philosophical and spiritual depth of Confucianism. This ambivalent engagement highlights the syncretic intellectual environment of the time, in which rivalry and appropriation often went hand in hand.

At the same time, cultural and social differences produced important distinctions between the two “Renaissances.” First, although humanism flourished during the Palaiologan period and even enjoyed the favor of imperial authority, it never received official recognition in the Eastern Roman Empire, where

Christianity remained the state religion. By contrast, in the Chinese Empire, Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism was formally endorsed as the orthodox interpretation of Confucian doctrine and of the classical canon.

Thus, even though tensions and competition existed among Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in the late medieval period, these traditions were generally able to coexist more peacefully in China. This was largely because the Chinese imperial state was fundamentally secular in nature: it exercised supreme authority over all religious institutions and could extend patronage to Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. As a result, the imperial court was able to balance the humanist scholarly tradition represented by Confucian literati with the influence of religious traditions, particularly Buddhism and Daoism.

Secondly, although vernacular literature also developed during the Palaiologan period, cultural production in Byzantium remained largely dominated by elite circles. In contrast, during the late Song and especially the Yuan dynasty, many literati found themselves distanced from the upper echelons of power and became more closely connected with popular society¹⁸.

Thirdly, although some scientific treatises—especially in fields such as astronomy—were produced during the Palaiologan period, late Byzantium did not witness major scientific breakthroughs. By contrast, the Song and Yuan eras represented a high point of scientific and technological innovation in China. Many foundational inventions, such as gunpowder and movable-type printing, reached new levels of development during this time¹⁹. If we consider that the original connotation of “Renaissance” refers to the Western European Renaissance—characterized in large part by its advancements in science and technology—then the cultural transformation of the Song and Yuan dynasties corresponds more closely to this broader pattern of renewal. In this sense, the Chinese “Renaissance” aligns more fully with the multiple dimensions typically associated with the term.

IV Some conclusive remarks and perspective for future studies

By drawing these preliminary comparisons between the Palaiologan Renaissance and the cultural revival of the Song and Yuan dynasties, we may conclude our study with the following observations. Although the Byzantine and Chinese worlds had little direct contact, striking parallels can nonetheless be identified in their respective late-medieval cultural renaissances. Both societies experienced a strong impulse to reaffirm and reinterpret their own traditions in response to new political and social challenges.

On one hand, these similarities highlight the broader universality of cultural evolution during the late medieval period, revealing comparable dynamics

¹⁸ Cf. XIMA GUANG (司马光), *Zizhi Tongjian* (资治通鉴), Beijing, 2011.

¹⁹ Cf. WANG RUILAI (王瑞来), *Intelligentsia goes to the civil society*, A brief survey of the Song-Yuan transition (士人走向民间, 宋元变革与社会转型), GuiLin, 2023.

of renewal across distant civilizations. On the other hand, each society also retained distinctive features, as demonstrated by the specific trajectories of the Palaiologan and Song–Yuan renaissances.

This presentation offers only a preliminary overview. It is our hope that future research will examine these parallels in greater depth and further develop the comparative study of cultural revivals across the diverse civilizations of the late medieval world.

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ПРЕЛИМИНАРНА СТУДИЈА О ПОРЕЂЕЊИМА ИЗМЕЂУ ПОЗНОВИЗАНТИЈСКЕ
РЕНЕСАНСЕ ПАЛЕОЛОГА (XIII–XV ВЕК) И РЕНЕСАНСЕ ТОКОМ ДИНАСТИЈА
СОНГ И ЈУАН У КИНЕСКОМ ЦАРСТВУ (X–XIV ВЕК)

Термин *ренесанса* традиционално се односи на период културне обнове у западној Европи који означава прелаз из средњег века у модерно доба. Поједини истраживачи, међутим, проширују овај појам и на друге културне сфере и историјске периоде. Тако се позни период Источног римског царства под династијом Палеолога (XIII–XV век) често описује као ренесанса Палеолога. Упоредива фаза културне трансформације може се уочити и у Кини током династије Сонг (X–XIII век), при чему су бројна достигнућа настављена и у доба монголске династије Јуан (XIII–XIV век).

И ренесанса Палеолога и културни процват у раздобљу Сонг–Јуан одликовали су се значајним достигнућима у књижевности, филозофији, религији и историографији. Упркос геополитичким и културним разликама, византијски и кинески свет пролазили су кроз сродне процесе културне трансмисије и обнове, утемељене у сопственим древним традицијама. Те паралеле обухватају развој књижевних форми, обновљено интересовање за класичну ученост, као и процват религијских традиција — исихазма у Византији, односно будизма и даоизма у Кини — уз истовремене тензије између религијских и хуманистичких интелектуалних струјања. У Византији се ова напетост испољавала у односу између исихазма и учених кругова посвећених античкој грчкој традицији, док се у Кини огледала у расправама између конфучијанских књижевника и будистичких или даонистичких учења.

Једно од могућих објашњења ових паралелних развоја лежи у ширим евроазијским трансформацијама позног средњег века, нарочито у интегративном утицају монголских освајања, која су омогућила до тада невиђене нивое културног контакта, размене и мобилности.

Истовремено, значајне разлике раздвајају ове две „ренесансе“. У Кини су напетости између религијских традиција (будизма и даоизма) и хуманистичке учености биле мање изражене него у Византији. То се може објаснити секуларнијим карактером кинеске царске власти, која је била у могућности да балансира и регулише и религијске и ученичке институције. Насупрот томе, Византијско царство је православно хришћанство одржавало као потпуно интегрисану државну религију, чиме је била ограничена могућност да царска власт институционално подржи или афирмише секуларну хуманистичку традицију независну од црквених структура.