

***Communication and Cooperation in Early Imperial China: Publicizing the Qin Dynasty.*** By Charles Sanft. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 251. \$85.00.

Students of early China have been following the publications of Charles Sanft for nearly a decade and will now welcome his first book, *Communication and Cooperation in Early Imperial China*. What Sanft means by “communication and cooperation” becomes clear through a quote from the noted political scientist Robert Axelrod (p. 21): “Governments cannot rule only through deterrence, but must instead achieve the voluntary compliance of the majority of the governed.”<sup>1</sup> While traditional accounts of the rise and astonishing success of the Qin dynasty have emphasized its ability to terrify the populace into submission, and more recently its effective administrative apparatus, Sanft aims to add to (not replace) these explanations by focusing on the state’s ability to achieve compliance without resorting solely to coercion or mechanisms of deterrence.

The reference to Axelrod, which Sanft might have discussed more fully for the benefit of uninitiated readers (such as poor humanists), informs his use of the word “cooperation,” which otherwise might not always seem like *le mot juste*. After all, when we speak of “cooperation,” usually we have in mind the cooperation of peers or equals—the cooperation of neighbours, of allied humanitarian institutions, and so on—and thus it sometimes seems strange to speak of complying with government statutes as “cooperation.” On the basis of game theory, however, Axelrod analyses people and the state as players who can choose to cooperate or not to cooperate, with greater or lesser benefits. Soon after the sentence that Sanft quotes, Axelrod goes on to describe two crucial interests of the state in such a competition, which he calls “reputation” and “regulation.” Establishing the state’s reputation means convincing the people that it will respond swiftly and surely to their behaviour, i.e. rewarding compliance (or “cooperation”) and punishing non-compliance, while regulation refers to the system of rules that the state institutes so as to encourage compliance: neither too strict, lest there be too much temptation to evade, nor too lax, lest the payoff from the people’s cooperation be unnecessarily diluted.<sup>2</sup>

These are the sorts of state activities that Sanft highlights in his timely book. With his detailed knowledge of the sources, including much recently excavated material, he offers a fresh perspective on government in Qin and early Han times.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155–58.

Under his rubric of “communication,” for example, Sanft argues that early Chinese emperors deployed numerous means to make their presence known to the people, but this enterprise was not construed—in contrast to Rome, for example—as identical to disseminating their likeness (and hence one does not find portraits of emperors on Chinese coins, p. 43).

Broadcasting the emperor’s authority was an effective means of eliciting cooperation: if people comprehend that the emperor’s influence is everywhere, they are less likely to try to disobey. Sanft reconsiders many well-known aspects of Qin rule within this paradigm, including the standardization of weights and measures (pp. 58–76); the emperors’ highly publicized tours through the realm, which he calls “progresses” (the Chinese term is *xun* 巡, pp. 77–99); different kinds of roads, including “walled roads and raised ways” that signalled the presence of the emperor (pp. 102–5) and a huge “Direct Road” (*zhidao* 直道) northward to the frontier with the Xiongnu 匈奴 (pp. 107–21); and compulsory household registration (pp. 124–34). Without denying the practical benefits of all these initiatives, which have been amply described in previous literature, he argues that scholars have failed to appreciate their communicative value. For example, the many people who observed the Emperor on one of his pompous progresses might have become experientially convinced that they would be unable to outrun his reach. And then they would talk to their neighbours about what they had seen.

Fundamentally, Sanft must be right that the Qin was more than just a terrifying and brutal regime, just as Axelrod is undeniably correct that functioning governments must attain voluntary compliance from the majority of the population. The book redresses a neglected aspect of Qin rule, and qualifies immediately as required reading for anyone interested in either early China or the history of Chinese political institutions.

Nevertheless, there are instances where I think Sanft overstates the importance of communication and cooperation, both in theory and in practice. Take this statement:

The establishment of a single, countrywide set of weights and measures created common knowledge of the Qin dynasty. The inscriptions attached to the new weights gave a particular form to that common knowledge they generated. By means of bronze, iron, and pottery, long-existing methods of mass production, and new developments in mechanical reproduction of text, the Qin made the new state known to its populace. (p. 74)

Sanft supports this interpretation with a cogent discussion of the widely disseminated inscriptions recording the First and Second Emperors’ proclamations regarding weights and measures (pp. 58–65). These have been discovered in abundance, and attest to the regime’s extensive efforts to communicate its reforms to the populace.

But there are other dimensions to consider—the obvious philosophical underpinnings, for example: just as the Qin state, in the name of “standardization” (*fa* 法), was destroying distinctions based on heredity within its borders, and then distinctive regimes across China as it conquered one rival after another, it naturally eliminated distinctive weights and measures (not to mention orthography, a point that Sanft neglects).<sup>3</sup> It would not have been consonant with the philosophies of influential ministers such as Li Si 李斯 (d. 208 B.C.) to permit standards deriving from any authority other than the imperial government.

Moreover, although Sanft is right that accountants would have been able to convert between different units of measure without much difficulty (p. 73), there were still substantial material benefits to standardization, as in the case of axle widths: with identically spaced ruts in the roads throughout the empire, long-distance travellers (whether mercantile or military) would no longer have to change carts at every district. In the context of pre-modern infrastructure and logistics, this must have led to enormous gains in efficiency. The standardization of railroad track gauges was not achieved in the United States until 1886, and it has been asserted that the lack of a standard gauge in the South was one factor contributing to the Union victory in the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, I have a slightly different understanding of the significance of systematic registration, once again finding more explanatory power in administrative practice than in communication. Sanft writes that by recording the ages of all males, “the Qin rulers sent a small but clear message of government presence and power to the men of the realm” (p. 129). I have argued elsewhere that the purpose of registration was to harness the labour and military service of the populace, and the law was construed as an instrument specifying each subject’s obligations to the state.<sup>5</sup> Sanft is careful not to claim that what he calls the “broad-reaching communicative effects” (p. 129) of the registration system were its sole merits, but one of his own examples shows that the extreme practical value of household registers persisted even when they could no longer have any communicative purpose: the prudent decision of the minister Xiao He 蕭何 (257–193 B.C.) to secure the registers for the benefit of the new Han empire

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Imre Galambos, *Orthography of Early Chinese Writing: Evidence from Newly Excavated Manuscripts* (Budapest: Department of East Asian Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, 2006), p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 515.

<sup>5</sup> Paul R. Goldin, “Han Law and the Regulation of Interpersonal Relations: ‘The Confucianization of the Law’ Revisited,” *Asia Major*, 3rd ser., 25, no. 1 (June 2012), pp. 1–31. Inasmuch as Sanft himself echoes the latter point (p. 134), he should have cited this article.

during the chaos of the collapse of the Qin (p. 130). Xiao He's primary goal was not communication with the populace; any such communication had already been completed by the Qin regime in the process of collecting the relevant information. Rather, Xiao He knew that governing the realm would be incomparably easier with the registers in hand—and perhaps impossible without them. Surely it was convenient to know everyone's name, age, and address.

But the mark of a strong and useful monograph is that the author could concede every one of a reviewer's objections, and his major thesis would remain intact. After reading *Communication and Cooperation in Early Imperial China*, no historian could reasonably deny that the Qin government adopted a range of sophisticated techniques to encourage the people's compliance, and our understanding is richer for it.

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***Tang China in Multi-Polar Asia: A History of Diplomacy and War.*** By Wang Zhenping. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. Pp. xiv + 462. \$65.00.

Tang studies seem to have been ebbing for some time, and yet the publication of a few notable books over the past few years, from Jonathan Karam Skaff's *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) to Sanping Chen's *Multicultural China in the Early Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), and to Mark Edward Lewis's *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2009), point to a steady stream of research that supplements, revises, and in some cases offers a genuinely innovative and original contribution with respect to previous scholarship. The volume under review does a fine job in presenting what I would regard as the best account of Tang foreign relations today available in English, supported by much original research. On the other hand, the central claim of the book, namely that a "multi-polar" international order developed in East Asia at the time of the Tang dynasty, requires a degree of argumentation and analysis of the historical circumstances that has not been fully attained.

This is what one might call a "thesis book" in the sense that it is based on a proposition, already evident in the title, that the author sets out to explicate and demonstrate. The proposition is that the Tang dynasty inhabited a world in which power in international relations was distributed across a variety of agents and not