

China's Early Empires: A Re-appraisal. Edited by Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe. University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, no. 67. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xxiii + 627. £80.00/\$135.00.

This long-awaited collaborative enterprise is intended as an update to the first volume of the *Cambridge History of China*, which covered the Qin 秦 and Han 漢 empires and was already half-obsolete when it was published in 1986.¹ The two most important characteristics of this “re-appraisal” are its focus on archaeology, and its relaxation of the chronological framework, since grand historical narratives cannot be confined within the arbitrary dates of particular dynasties. (The Eastern Han dynasty ended in 220 C.E. only because that is the year when Cao Cao 曹操 happened to perish and his son decided that the time had come to conclude the charade.) The editors are to be commended for bringing together an impressive list of scholars who collectively address various aspects of the history of this period, including administration, law, art, religion, and literature, and the book aspires to serve as a central reference work for scholars in the field, though it is perhaps not suitable for undergraduate instruction, as it does not attempt the kind of rationalized synthesis to be found in, say, Mark Edward Lewis’s recent one-volume history of the period.² The lavish illustrations in *China's Early Empires* will impress anyone who knows the inconveniences involved in publishing visual images.

The more successful chapters lay out the state of the field even-handedly: the extant sources, relevant controversies, and prospects for future research. These include Enno Giele’s “Excavated Manuscripts: Context and Methodology” (pp. 114–34), which is probably the best single survey of the avalanche of recently excavated manuscripts, their impact on the study of early China, and the methodological problems that they raise. Michael Loewe, famed for his decades of work in the area of early Chinese administration, provides several summae that can be cited as authoritative (e.g., “The Laws of 186 BCE,” pp. 253–60; “Social Distinctions, Groups and Privileges,” pp. 296–307; and “The Operation of the Government,” pp. 308–19).

Nevertheless, there are two recurring sets of problems in *China's Early Empires*, marring what should have been a landmark publication: overstatement and under-annotation.

¹ Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 1, *The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.–A.D. 220* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). This work made very little use of archaeology; Yinqueshan 銀雀山, the important tomb excavated in 1972, does not even appear in the index.

² *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han*, History of Imperial China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2007).

A good example of the sort of overstatement that I mean appears toward the end of the book, when Michael Nylan states: “The *Yantie lun*, in sixty chapters, is usually (mis)read as a verbatim transcription of debates on economic policy convened by Zhaodi (r. 87–74 BCE) in 81 BCE” (“The Art of Persuasion from 100 BCE to 100 CE,” p. 495). Misread by whom? Nylan provides no references. To say that *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 (*Discourses on Salt and Iron*) “is usually (mis)read as a verbatim account” is simply a straw-man argument. Esson M. Gale, writing as early as 1931, characterized the relationship between the debates and the text thus: “This debate serves as the canvass on which Huan K’uan embroiders many a dialectical gem, and into which he weaves the red thread of ‘Confucian’ aphorisms and ‘sacred texts.’”³ I cannot think of any serious scholar over the past eighty years who has pretended that *Yantie lun* is “a verbatim transcription.”

Overstatements and straw-man arguments of this kind recur throughout the book. In an earlier chapter (“*Yin–yang*, Five Phases, and *qi*”), Nylan begins by stating, reasonably, “that *yin–yang*, *wuxing*, and *qi* were separate concepts that eventually fused together” (p. 398). This is correct—and important, as there has been a tendency in some scholarship to conjoin *yin–yang* 陰陽 and *wuxing* 五行 as though they were but two elements of the same overarching philosophy.⁴ Simply put, *yin–yang* cosmology understands *qi* as composed of two aspects; *wuxing* cosmology understands *qi* as composed of five. *Yin–yang* and *wuxing* were fundamentally distinct concepts that came to be fused only in much later times by syncretist authors aiming for a comprehensive theory of *qi* incorporating as much previous speculation as possible. One can find *yinyang* without *wuxing* in some texts, *wuxing* without *yinyang* in others, and *yinyang* and *wuxing* blended in still other sources.

But then Nylan’s argument goes awry:

Far from constituting the counterparts to *yin* and *yang qi*, the five types of *qi* known as *wuxing* had to be “made concordant with [*shun* 順] *yin* and *yang*, so as to align [*zheng* 正] the duties between ruler and minister, father and child.” Calls for conformity with *yin* and *yang* would be redundant if the *wuxing* were simply aspects of *yin* and *yang qi* by another name. (p. 404)

³ *Discourses on Salt and Iron: A Debate on State Control of Commerce and Industry in Ancient China*, Sinica Leidensia 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1931), p. xix.

⁴ See, e.g., Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 55–68; and my review of that book (*China Review International* 16, no. 3 [2009], p. 372f.).

Who ever argued that “the *wuxing* were simply aspects of *yin* and *yang qi* by another name”? (Here too, Nylan does not give a reference; she mentions only “prevailing wisdom” on p. 398.) The problem has been that some scholars have written as though Chinese theories of *qi* and its regular processes always included both *yin-yang* and *wuxing* as subdivisions of *qi*—not that anyone has claimed that *wuxing* and *yin-yang* are two different ways of saying the same thing. Once again, Nylan ends up arguing against a position that no one has actually taken.

In prosecuting this point, Nylan also contends, unpersuasively, that the famous passage in the “Yingtong” 應同 chapter of the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋—in which the rise of each of the five phases of *qi* is associated with the rise of the Yellow Emperor 黃帝, Yu 禹, Tang 湯, King Wen 文王, and whoever will succeed the Zhou 周 dynasty—does not articulate a theory of the Five Phases (p. 399ff.).⁵ The crucial line in “Yingtong” addresses what will happen when the *next* political union, i.e. the dynasty associated with Water, comes to an end as well:

水氣至而不知，數備，將徙于土。⁶

When Water *qi* reaches its peak, no one may be aware of it, but the reckoning will be complete, and [the cycle] will revert to Earth.

In other words, there are five phases of *qi*, and only five—and their sequence is not “coincidental,” as Nylan speculates (p. 400). (This was, of course, an extraordinarily bold thing for the authors of *Lüshi chunqiu* to say, as it was tantamount to prophesying not only the inevitable rise, but also the inevitable fall, of the Qin dynasty.)

This habit of building a case to destroy some supposedly rampant misconception pervades *China's Early Empires* and makes it sound preachy. Again and again, the reader is assailed by the attitude that “prevailing wisdom” has misunderstood early China, and this book now comes to the rescue. It starts right at the beginning; indeed, it seems to be directly related to editorial decisions at the heart of the project.

⁵ Nylan also writes: “*Qi* in the *Huainanzi* functions as the subtle sensory medium permitting connections to be made between discrete things, but the *wuxing* do not necessarily represent Five Phases [of?] *qi*” (p. 402). I do not fully understand this sentence (what is a “sensory medium?”), but if the claim is that *wuxing* in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 does not necessarily refer to *qi*, I cannot agree. It is clear from the closing section of the “Dixing” 墜形 chapter that the Five Phases are construed as *qi*. See He Ning 何寧, *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋, *Xinbian Zhuzi jicheng* 新編諸子集成 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1998), *juan* 4, pp. 374–77.

⁶ Chen Qiyong 陳奇猷, *Lüshi chunqiu xin jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋新校釋, *Zhonghua yaoji jishi congshu* 中華要籍集釋叢書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2002), *juan* 13, p. 683.

In her half of the editorial introduction, Nylan explains that the contributors were asked to avoid certain potentially misleading terms, including “state,” “intellectual,” “elite,” “orthodoxy,” “supernatural,” “art,” “correlative thinking,” “philosophy,” and “Buddhism” (p. 3f.). She continues: “Believing that good history aims to be as precise as the sources allow (but not one whit more), we have all tried to step back from generalities and abstractions, however comforting such pabulum may be” (p. 4). The problem is that interpreting complex sources sometimes requires a *niveau* of abstraction, and not all abstraction is “pabulum.”

Take, for example, the maligned “state.” The word is not useless *merely* because it represents a modern abstraction. In his own half of the introduction, Michael Loewe notes:

Grim evidence of punishment by mutilation is seen in a burial pit for convicts close to the tomb of the First Qin Emperor. The histories state that this practice was abolished in 167 BCE, but remains of limbs hacked by axes or other implements in a mass grave of convicts buried close to the tomb of Jingdi (d. 141 BCE) may throw doubt on such a claim. (p. 9)

Who convicted these convicts, and then carried out the grim sentences, if not the state? A primitive chieftain can punish; he can even kill; but he cannot “convict.” “Conviction” requires institutions, including laws, courts, and enforcement agencies that cannot exist except in a state, because it is only through the theoretical state that they have any power. And Loewe is not wrong for calling them “convicts,” because anyone who has not succumbed to the overreaction of tabooing the word “state” would readily agree that the early Chinese empires were states.

Nor are we ever told precisely what is wrong with “Buddhism,” which is no more or less objectionable than “Christianity.” Though she does not indicate this, Nylan must be referring to T. H. Barrett’s chapter (“Religious Change under Eastern Han and Its Successors: Some Current Perspectives and Problems,” pp. 430–48), which is confusing in its handling of this issue. Barrett begins by warning against the use of the word “Buddhism”: it “implies a coherence that did not exist in the period under consideration” (p. 430).⁷ But then he himself deploys it repeatedly:

⁷ This comes as part of a criticism of a recent translation of “Yuandao” 原道, by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824 C.E.), but it is unfair, inasmuch as Han Yu himself used the word *Fo* 佛 in the passage in question. See Ma Tongbo 馬通伯, *Han Changli wenji jiaozhu* 韓昌黎文集校注 (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe 古典文學出版社, 1957), *juan* 1, p. 8. In other words, if the word “Buddhism” speciously implies coherence, one must blame Han Yu, not the translator.

“Buddhist manuscripts” (p. 432), “the transmission of Buddhism” (p. 433), “Buddhist practitioners” (p. 444), “Buddhists in China” (p. 445), and so on. So clearly something has gone wrong in Barrett’s exposition as well.

What I think Barrett *intends* to say is that Buddhism was diverse and vibrant in this early period, and we ought not to suppose uniformity either in doctrine or in practice, and especially across social classes (e.g., p. 436). Moreover, Barrett reasonably questions how confidently one can identify “Buddhist” themes in art without detailed knowledge of their social context: “Can we rightly use the terms ‘Buddhist’ or even ‘Daoist’ of a decorative element in isolation from any of the beliefs or practices with which it was originally associated?” (p. 435f.) Thereafter, as is all too common in this book, he misstates his argument:

Nowhere in the genuinely early texts do we find the notion of a coherent “religion” worthy of any form of commitment. All religious movements, including what we call “Buddhism,” are treated as mere cults deserving of only mention in passing. (p. 441ff.)

This is a category mistake: a “religion” can be *both* coherent *and* a “mere cult,” because the spread or popularity of a religion is not the same thing as its coherence. (Old Order Amish religion is extremely coherent, but it is not widespread.) As there are many early Buddhist texts, such as the *Pratyutpanna-sūtra* (*Banzhou sanmei jing* 般舟三昧經), that advance what I would consider a coherent religious vision—and one can say this without implying that they were influential—Barrett has overstated his case into oblivion. By the end of his chapter, it is no longer clear what he means. (Readers in religious studies might also have expected some explanation of the difference, in Barrett’s conception, between a “religion” and a “cult.”)⁸

Even Loewe, who is usually a careful controversialist, occasionally overstates his case in this book. At the beginning of his chapter on the laws from Zhangjiashan 張家山, he writes:

There is no evidence to show that a concept of “law” emerged in early imperial times that was based on acknowledged principles such as those of limiting the powers of the sovereign, restricting the imposition of authority and protecting the “rights” of individuals. (p. 253)

⁸ I am indebted to my colleague Justin McDaniel for this observation. Thanks also to Tao Jiang, Yuri Pines, and Nancy S. Steinhardt, who kindly read and commented on previous drafts of this review.

Inasmuch as law was conceived as an instrument of the sovereign, one will probably search in vain for laws that limit his powers. But laws restricting the imposition of authority and protecting the rights of individuals are not rare in the Zhangjiashan and Shuihudi 睡虎地 manuscripts. Indeed, in a later chapter (pp. 297–99), Loewe himself elucidates the *jue* 爵 (which he translates as “orders of honour”), or the twenty ranks of merit in Qin and early Han society that came with substantial legal privileges. It is hopeless to try to deny that these status-based privileges were “rights.” (They correspond to what are called *jura* in the Western legal tradition.)⁹ They were not *equal* rights, nor were they *inalienable* (or endowed by a Creator), but they were rights nonetheless, and the law sedulously enumerated and protected them. We can infer many other rights from these texts, including the right to be registered as “senior” (*lao* 老), and hence exempt from certain duties, at the statutory age. Moreover, there were safeguards against excessive “imposition of authority”; for example, officials who unduly detained suspects or overburdened households for emergency military service were subject to punishment.¹⁰ The laws of Qin and Han were not based on the same principles as those of the United States or United Kingdom today (and no one should expect otherwise). But it is an overstatement to declare that “they do not assert principles such as rights or duties” (p. 253).¹¹ Eventually, a reader will tire of having to reconstruct what the authors might have meant, since they could not have meant precisely what they said.

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To move now to the second general defect: the book is inadequately annotated, and the problem is not so much negligence as a distinct pattern on the part of the authors and editors to cite some scholars and not others. Presenting a partial perspective on the secondary literature is an especially serious demerit in a reference book.

For example, in a book that stresses archaeology, it is curious that the leading Western archaeologist of China, namely Lothar von Falkenhausen, is scarcely mentioned. The bibliography contains no items by Falkenhausen published more recently

⁹ E.g., Henry Campbell Black (1860–1927), *A Law Dictionary Containing Definitions of the Terms and Phrases of American and English Jurisprudence, Ancient and Modern*, 2nd ed. (St. Paul, MN: West, 1910), “jus” (s.v.).

¹⁰ See my “Han Law and the Regulation of Interpersonal Relations: ‘The Confucianization of the Law’ Revisited,” *Asia Major* (forthcoming).

¹¹ Nylan’s assessment is more accurate: “except in noble households that were exempted, all free adults aged between fifteen and sixty-nine, by Chinese reckoning, were full legal entities deserving a measure of protection in return for taxes and labor services paid to the government” (p. 277).

than 1995. Broader engagement with his work would have aided Susan N. Erickson in her discussion of *mingqi* 明器, which she defines as “generally less expensive clay or wooden models of objects, animals, and human beings” (“Han Dynasty Tomb Structures and Contents,” p. 53). The best discussion of *mingqi* in English appears in Falkenhausen’s *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius*,¹² which has been available long enough for Erickson to have consulted it.

It is just as strange to read a chapter on Han tombs that refers to Wu Hung only once. There are several titles by Wu Hung in the bibliography, but I could find just a single reference in Erickson’s chapter (p. 36, n. 36). Here too, ignoring an important scholar’s work comes at a cost, as when Erickson mentions phalli and erotic images discovered in tombs, and then opines: “No satisfying explanation regarding the function(s) of such objects in tombs—especially the comic copulation scenes on Sichuan bricks—has yet been proposed, aside from vague references connecting fertility and health” (p. 81). Wu Hung has discussed “such objects” in print¹³ (as have I),¹⁴ readers will have to decide for themselves whether the explanations are “satisfying,” but at the very least Erickson should have cited them.

Some other obvious failures. In their chapter on “The Archaeology of the Outlying Lands,” Erickson, Yi Sōng-mi, and Nylan describe “Han expansionist policies” as a “response” to the challenge presented by the Xiongnu 匈奴 confederation (p. 135), but a reference to Nicola Di Cosmo is necessary here, as he has argued that, on the contrary, the militarization of the Xiongnu came in response to earlier Chinese expansion into their traditional pasturelands.¹⁵ The various “responses” on either side of the frontier were more complex than the authors make them out to be.

¹² *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BC): The Archaeological Evidence, Ideas, Debates and Perspectives 2* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA, 2006), p. 301ff. Falkenhausen also distinguishes between *mingqi* and the sort of figurines that Erickson mentions, which he calls *yong* 俑.

¹³ E.g., “Myths and Legends in Han Funerary Art: Their Pictorial Structure and Symbolic Meanings as Reflected in Carvings on Sichuan Sarcophagi,” in *Stories from China’s Past: Han Dynasty Pictorial Tomb Reliefs and Archaeological Objects from Sichuan Province, People’s Republic of China*, ed. Lucy Lim (San Francisco: Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 1987), p. 75f. Wu Hung seems to avoid the subject in his more recent *The Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010), but anyway that book probably appeared too late for Erickson to have seen it.

¹⁴ “The Motif of the Woman in the Doorway and Related Imagery in Traditional Chinese Funerary Art,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no. 4 (December 2001), pp. 539–48.

¹⁵ *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 167–88.

Later in the same chapter, they refer glibly to the mummy from Yingpan 營盤 as “the ‘poster child’ for northwest archaeology” (p. 147), but do not mention Victor H. Mair, who has done more to draw attention to the Tarim mummies than any other Western scholar.¹⁶ Elsewhere (p. 255), Loewe refers to the penal codes inscribed, according to the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, on iron vessels, without citing any of the diverse studies of this notorious (and questionable) account.¹⁷ Nylan complains that “few have pondered the possible significance of the accounts wherein [the First Emperor of Qin and Wang Mang 王莽] made a show of parading their support for ‘family values’ in general, and ‘virtuous women’ in particular” (p. 284); it would have been right for her to note that I have been one of those few,¹⁸ even if she does not agree with my opinions.

So as not to enervate the reader with a continued litany, let me point out one final example of under-annotation that compromises the integrity of the book. In her chapter on “Administration of the Family,”¹⁹ Nylan reproduces an image from a tomb at Dingjiazha 丁家疰 as evidence that “in many peasant households, women would have helped to plough in the fields” (p. 280f.). I happen to have discussed this image in a previous publication²⁰—in fact, Nylan e-mailed me afterwards to ask the source—and thus I was surprised to see no acknowledgment or reference. Moreover, interpreting this image as straightforward evidence that women would have ploughed in the fields is tenuous in the extreme. Yes, most peasant women would have helped to plough, but this is not the right image to use as support. First, the woman is

¹⁶ On the Yingpan tomb, see, e.g., J. P. Mallory and Victor H. Mair, *The Tarim Mummies: Ancient China and the Mystery of the Earliest Peoples from the West* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), pp. 201–3.

¹⁷ E.g., Donald B. Wagner, *Iron and Steel in Ancient China*, Handbuch der Orientalistik IV.9 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), p. 57ff. There is also an illuminating discussion (though without considerations of authenticity) in David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 205 (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), p. 296ff.

¹⁸ *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), esp. p. 78ff.

¹⁹ Nylan adds the curious subtitle “(*Qihuai bisi* 齊懷必死),” which she should have explained. It is a reference to *Qianfu lun* 潛夫論 (as I discovered with the help of digital databases), and means roughly “to be prepared to die with single-minded devotion,” i.e. in defense of chastity. See Wang Jipei 汪繼培 (b. 1775), *Qianfu lun jian jiaozheng* 潛夫論箋校正, ed. Peng Duo 彭鐸, *Xinbian Zhuzi jicheng* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), *juan* 19, p. 236 (“Duansong” 斷訟 chapter). Nylan does not discuss *Qianfu lun* or its author, Wang Fu 王符 (c. 90–165 C.E.), anywhere in her contributions to the book, so this appears to be an academic game.

²⁰ “The Motif of the Woman in the Doorway and Related Imagery in Traditional Chinese Funerary Art,” p. 544f.

shown hoeing, not ploughing. More importantly, as I emphasized to Nylan when she contacted me about this, the woman is stark naked (not simply “bare-breasted,” as Nylan describes her in the book), and it is highly unlikely, for both moral and practical reasons, that women would have routinely worked in the fields without any clothes. The image begs to be interpreted symbolically, and the very large tree overspreading her probably has a role to play in the iconography as well. Ironically, Nylan concludes this chapter with a homily about *naïveté* in the interpretation of visual evidence: “Visual rhetoric is no less difficult to interpret than literary rhetoric, though many think its messages are self-explanatory” (p. 295, before recommending specific studies to counter “the perils of such naïveté”).

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With the exception of a handful of contributors who do not engage in polemics and simply present the state of their field concisely and judiciously, the authors and editors of *China's Early Empires* seem not to have been content to produce a book that would stand the test of time, but aimed instead to obliterate all competing scholarship. Such aggression is distasteful and counterproductive. Some scholars see their peers as allies in a shared enterprise; others see them as competitors. In a world where fewer and fewer people comprehend, let alone appreciate, what we do, we might wish to cooperate more in our common cause of understanding the past.

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The Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs. By Wu Hung. London: Reaktion Books, 2010. Pp. 272. £33.00.

Until very recently, archaeology in China was essentially funerary archaeology. Tombs by ten thousands, of all periods, from prehistory to the last dynasty, have been excavated for more than sixty years throughout the whole country. It is only natural that archaeologists and historians now try to set this enormous amount of data in order, to find clues to understand its meaning. In other words, it is time now for syntheses on what tombs tell us about funerary practices and art within a civilization which has devoted so much energy to managing death and the otherworld. Most of the syntheses actually published deal with a long period or a recurrent theme, but few of them aspire to treat all the aspects of funerary art and almost all the periods. This