

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

controlled by a single superpower. The second important aspect of this thesis is the manner in which international relations worked under the Tang, which is expressed by the principles of adaptability and “appropriateness,” that is, Tang engagement with other powers was based on a flexibility and pragmatism based on the actual circumstances that surfaced at different times and in different places.

In terms of the contribution to the field, this study to a certain degree follows in the furrow of works that aimed to study the position of traditional China in the wider world, such as *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), edited by John King Fairbank, and *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th–14th Centuries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), edited by Morris Rossabi. Both of these books are quite old, but a kinship cannot be denied, in terms of the attempt to describe an international context in which China occupies a place that is more complicated and nuanced than Confucian, ideologically-laden concepts of a sinocentric world order might project. A broader discussion of these issues, as expounded and discussed in secondary literature, would have been beneficial, would have grounded the author's conceptual claims in a long-running scholarly debate, and made a more direct or obvious contribution to the field. As is, the link with other scholars' opinions is more inferred and indirect.

The book consists of six chapters, an introduction, and a short conclusion. The first four chapters treat the Tang dynasty's relations with four neighbouring regions and associated foes: first, the nomadic powers of the steppes, Türks and Uighurs; second, on the northeast and eastern seaboard, various kingdoms of Korea and Manchuria; third, the southeastern kingdom of Nanzhao 南詔; and fourth, the far northwestern regions of Tibet, present-day Xinjiang, and Central Asia. The two remaining chapters deal with policy, first (Chapter Five) in terms of local vs. central management of foreign relations, and second (Chapter Six) in terms of the political philosophy and strategic principles inherent to foreign relations. These studies are all extremely detailed and highly commendable for the extensive work on primary sources. These chapters present an excellent survey of Tang foreign relations, and a comprehensive study of the frontiers of the Tang dynasty. Particularly illuminating are the parts that discuss the deliberative process that produced policy decisions.

The critical question a reader confronts is whether these chapters support the notion of the multi-polarity of Asian foreign relations during the Tang dynasty as claimed in the author's thesis. A discordant note is introduced in the temporal framework, since organizing Asian historical time around the duration of the Tang dynasty appears already to introduce a bias that necessarily emphasizes Tang centrality. Using a Chinese dynastic structure makes it difficult to escape a Tang-centric view of both time and space. It also begs the question as to what order preceded the Tang;

arguably, the period of North-South division was even more multi-polar, in the sense of a greater balance among a larger number of players. If the period of the Tang dynasty witnessed the emergence of a multi-polar world, all poles were referring to a centre that was still China. While the author's contentions that Tang China was not the only major player, that it had a pragmatic approach to foreign policy, and that it was forced to make compromises, can be endorsed with confidence, such endorsement cannot easily extend to the notion that there was "multi-polarity." Even in the bipolar world of the Cold War, and in the single-superpower, post-Cold War world, governments have had to recognize limits beyond which their power could not be projected, and have needed to make strategic assessments and compromises, as the recent history of the United States amply demonstrates. To make a more rigorous case for multi-polarity it would be necessary to extract Tang China from the centre and focus, for instance, on the Türk and Uighur empires and *their* strategic goals and policies. The same can be said for Koguryo, Parhae, Nanzhao, and Tibet, just to mention the main ones, as truly active and independent agents in a multipolar foreign relations environment. It is clear that these states conducted relations with powers other than the Tang, had goals and strategies of their own, and pursued political, military, and diplomatic goals of their own. However, this level of the discussion is only accessed to the extent that it is relevant to explicate their policies *vis-à-vis* the Tang. If we consider, for instance, the much-debated question of the tribute system, the author is right in considering the diplomatic practice of tribute relations as a mere veneer that concealed a much more complex set of interactions, which therefore cannot be reduced to a simple formula of exchange: acceptance of subordination for commercial or political benefits. Yet, it would be difficult to deny that the East Asian world was organized around principles of international relations in which China (the Tang dynasty) played a central role, until we bring into the examination relations that occurred *outside* the tribute system and that can be understood as a counterweight to a "Tang world order."

The efforts of the author to diminish the preponderance of this expansive and powerful polity in the end runs against the impression, which emerges strongly from the study of foreign relations, that, after centuries of fragmentation, China was reconquering a position of political and cultural dominance, and Chang'an was not just an imperial centre and a cosmopolitan capital, but also an inspiration and a model for other courts and governments. To dismiss the view of a multi-level centrality of the Tang is not, in other words, a simple job, and Wang's argumentative structure, if anything, reinforces that view. However, by redirecting the historical viewpoint from a narrative of uncontested grandeur to the nitty-gritty of frontier politics, petty compromises, pragmatic retreats, utilitarian choices, and military failures, the author conveys precisely and persuasively the Tang consciousness of the limitations of imperial power.

A particularly illuminating, and, in my view, very effective chapter is the fifth, in which the author discusses the various agents and forces on the Tang side that operated in foreign relations, as well as the strategic decision-making process and policy enforcement. Here the underlying thesis is that central and local forces (two metaphorical horses) drove foreign policy (the wagon) at the same time and in mutual tension between them. Through various case studies the author is able to provide ample evidence that neither horse was able to drive the wagon alone, and one or the other often took precedence. First of all, the quality of governance was critical to the openness of the consultative process at court between the emperor and his officials. While there was at times a degree of openness, not all emperors were equally inclined to follow their officials' advice. Different emperors acted with different degrees of openness, and the role of the officials in the decisions relative to foreign policy at times played a central and critical role, while at other times was reduced to perfunctory consultations. Regardless of the strategic decisions being made at the court and government levels, foreign policy depended on the information provided by local officials, who were involved in intelligence gathering and handling diplomacy along the frontiers. At yet another level, local officials were also responsible, through their less-than-exemplary behaviour, for causing problems that impacted national security. Corruption and tyrannical or overbearing attitudes were among the most noxious behaviours exhibited by local functionaries. Yet another level of analysis consists of the relationship between frontier generals and field commanders and the Tang court. The author illustrates many cases of generals fighting various enemies, in particular Tibetans, Tanguts, and Uighurs, and their often fraught communication with emperors and court officials.

In the last chapter (Six) the author reviews and explains the doctrine of "appropriateness" in foreign relations, as the main philosophical support for his theory of multi-polarity. The question of flexibility in foreign relations has been discussed many times and in various forms in relation to different periods of Chinese history, including Han (e.g. by Yü Ying-shih), Liao (e.g. by Jing-shen Tao), Song and Yuan (e.g., in the already mentioned book by Morris Rossabi), Ming (e.g., by Ian Johnston), and in general works such as Arthur Waldron's book *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). The author follows the well-trodden path of contrasting an ideological "Confucian" stance with pragmatic or opportunistic approaches and investigates the philosophical underpinnings and the historical precedents of "following the needs of the times." On the one hand, the absence of engagement with the extant body of literature makes the author's attempt to link the historical and philosophical levels appear somewhat superficial. Most of the chapter, however, is intriguing and engaging as it goes on to survey Tang strategies and specific policies adopted in different scenarios. Ample space is given,

in the early Tang, to the influence exerted by Wei Zheng 魏徵, and for later periods by other celebrated statisticians such as Di Renjie 狄仁傑. The chapter effectively and clearly shows that the Tang was able to choose among different strategies: “loose rein,” containment and negotiation, constructive ambiguity, passive military response and active defence, or annexation. Together with a thematic orientation, this chapter is also organized chronologically, and ends with a short assessment of foreign policy in the final decades of the dynasty. The general thrust is that flexibility and “appropriateness” in foreign policy and military strategy were the preferred *modus operandi* for the Tang to adjust to different situations. Flexibility is especially evident in the use “soft power” and “hard power.” What is meant by soft and hard power is, respectively, cultural suasion and diplomacy in contrast to military force and active defence. The author states in the introduction that all states used versions of soft and hard power, but in fact, throughout the book and especially in the last chapter, only the Tang are credited with the ability to do so. It does appear, therefore, that too little attention is paid to the circumstances under which polities other than the Tang operated, and to the choices they made.

My main objection to the general structure of the argument is that there is a great disparity in the treatment of the Tang on the one hand and everyone else on the other in the investigation of motives, strategies, and cultural backgrounds. It is for instance rather dispiriting to find, on page 35, the tired repetition of the most common clichés on the nomads, namely that the Türks moved around in pursuit of grass and water and that their “nomadic way of life was the foundation for their military strategy of total mobility.” Whereas the Tang strategy against the Türks is given sustained and penetrating attention, the hackneyed handling of the Türks shows that the argument for multi-polarity is not matched by the equal treatment of each pole.

In conclusion, this reader applauds the author for having produced what is going to be the standard book on Tang foreign relations, the only book by a single author (to my knowledge) that takes a holistic, comprehensive approach to Tang frontiers and foreign relations. Based on exacting scholarship on the primary sources the book provides detailed accounts of the relations between the Tang and their neighbours, as well as an excellent analysis of the internal processes that influenced foreign policy and strategic decisions. As for whether East Asia’s international relations were really “multi-polar” I believe the answer lies in what one means by multi-polar. This book certainly succeeds in pointing out the limits of Tang imperial power. Whether this power was matched by “poles” with a similar power of attraction, however, remains to be demonstrated.

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