Heaven Is Empty: A Cross-Cultural Approach to "Religion" and Empire in Ancient China. By Filippo Marsili. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 331. $90.00.

The main argument of this book, as suggested by the title, is to re-examine the concept of "religion" from a cross-cultural perspective. The author Filippo Marsili chose Han China and Augustan Rome as a pair to conduct comparison. In the course of the study, the author concentrates on the Han imperial cult and its significance in the construction of Han empire, while Rome was treated as a comparandum. The eye-catching phrase in the title, "Heaven Is Empty" sums up Marsili's central thesis, that is, "Heaven is like an ancient vessel that commands awe and respect on account of its remote origins, but which is in fact empty. According to Sima Qian [司馬遷], capable leaders and delusional charlatans alike were free to fill the vessel as they saw fit" (p. 215). This very interesting view, alluding to the sacred *ding*-tripod discovered in Emperor Wu's 武帝 time, can certainly bring up enthusiastic discussions and debates among scholars who are concerned with early China, early Chinese religion, and comparative antiquity.

In Chapter 1, "Readings of the 'Sacred,'" the author emphasizes the need to review all the concepts in the study of religion based on Western tradition, in particular the Abrahamic religions, and not to look at the Chinese material concerning "religion" by employing the Western conceptual tool. The author copiously discussed the use of some of the key concepts in the study of "religion" in the Chinese context and convincingly demonstrated his point. The author culled together references from various fields (Sinology, classical studies, religious studies), which should be very useful for readers who are not familiar with the subject. The author's constant vigilance against using unqualified terms to refer to the "religious" phenomena in early China is commendable. The author's use of the term "extrahuman power" in referring to the Chinese idea of the spiritual beings is a wise choice, as the term could avoid certain conceptual confusion regarding the phenomenon that had confronted many different cultures in history. One cannot do better than simply quoting the author to show the gist of his arguments:

> [T]he biggest problems in the more or less implicit application of Abrahamic notions to the study of Early China lie in the (1) old conceit about the preeminence of theological knowledge over all other speculative doctrines; (2) the assumption that the divine of invisible must occupy an ontologically superior realm in early China as well; (3) the idea that the sacred-profane dichotomy can be unproblematically assumed as a cross-cultural category; (4) the fundamental role of religion in defining individual and collective identities in an

> exclusionary way; (5) the extra-human origin of foundational shared values; (6) and finally the expectation that all societies must conceptualize non-human phenomena as all parts of one integrated system, or coherent universe. (p. 27)

The author, therefore, effectively presents his case and gives the reader a road map to think about how to proceed to investigate the history of Chinese "religions" without falling into the trap of unconsciously employing conceptions derived from the model of Abrahamic religions. This should be equally useful for Western scholars as well as Chinese scholars, whose understanding of "religion" was largely informed by studies of religion originated from the Western, Abrahamic religious traditions. This should also be useful for students of the Roman religion, since, for the Romans, the Abrahamic religions that allowed only one supreme deity were also not a native concept. Marsili points out that in Rome religion did not determine cultural identity and political allegiance in an exclusionary way, while in Han China the bureaucratic centralization was mainly aimed at a fiscal and political control of regional centres of power. The process of bureaucratization did not correspond to the creation of a common religion. Thus, there are some interesting similarities between the Roman and the Chinese cosmological assumptions.

In Chapter 2, "Writing the Empire," the author concentrates on Sima Qian's effort in the *Shiji* 史記 to describe the religious policy of Emperor Wu. Marsili articulates the thesis that if we read the *Shiji* without the hindsight established by the Eastern Han Confucians, we will see that Sima Qian has given a picture that did not portrait the Han empire as he perceived as a "Confucian" state, and that the early Han emperors did not follow the so-called *Zhou li* 周禮, or the *li* extolled by Confucius. Instead, the Han rulers, until the reign of Emperor Wu, followed a legalist and militaristic inclined rulership. This very perceptive observation, and with well-articulated argument, is to be applauded and deserves serious recognition for students of early imperial China whose main readings are English sources. For this the author has made an important contribution and helped enhance a deeper understanding of Chinese history by digging at the root of a long tradition of taking for granted the facade of a Confucian state given to the Western Han by Eastern Han and later generations of Confucians. Marsili traces this tradition down to the modern era and examines the development of modern Chinese historiography in the context of this long tradition.

A major issue that Marsili tries to tackle in this chapter is the nature of the "extra-human" realm in early China. He points out that, wherever the extra-human is mentioned in the *Shiji*, it does not have the traits of a coherent, not to mention moral, system (p. 97). In other words, this extra-human realm, unlike the conventional conception of a pantheon in the ancient Greco-Roman world, does not constitute an

organic cosmos, a system of deities that preside over different sectors of reality and whose interactions could help explain natural and historical events (p. 97). However, one might add the fact that in the *Liji* 禮記 there is the idea that "he who owns the world should sacrifice to the hundred gods; those enfeoffed lords whose territory encompasses [the mountains and rivers] should make sacrifice; those who do not [possess mountains and rivers] should not sacrifice" 有天下者祭百神。諸侯在其地則祭之，亡其地則不祭.[1] Thus, at least in theory, the author of *Liji* was laying out a plan of human-extrahuman relationship based on the hierarchical order of the unified empire. The deities in this order might not have the kind of imperative moral authority, yet they were there with potentials to influence human fate. Marsili was no doubt correct in stating that this extra-human realm and the spirits and ghosts described in the *Shiji* "almost never have a major impact on humans' lives" (p. 98). This is to say, never have a major impact on humans' lives in the eyes of Sima Qian. But whether it was also the case in the eyes of other people, including Emperor Wu, is a whole different matter. Marsili summarizes the history of Sima Qian's *Shiji* as "impartial and nonteleological" (p. 68) because Sima Qian never admitted the working of any extra-human or divine force in his narrative about human affairs. What is interesting and worth noticing, however, is that despite of Sima Qian's personal view, the fact that he recorded a large amount of information, impartially or not, gave us ample opportunity to probe the religious mentality of his time, beyond Emperor Wu and his immediate circle.

In Chapter 3, "Narrating the Empire," the author engages in a more extended way a comparison between the *Shiji* and Polybius. Marsili indicates that neither Polybius nor the authors of the *Shiji* believed that political unification necessarily coincided with the establishment of superior justice or with a kind of order they might have actually welcomed. In other words, political unification did not require religious hegemony of certain deity or deities. Both Sima Qian and Polybius were practical and empirically minded observers. Their historical sensibility did not lead them to expect that the world must make sense as a whole, because many examples of human follies lay before their eyes blatantly, without any sanction from a higher force (p. 133). Also, Marsili considers that Sima Qian's narrative of the historical process of the Qin and Han empires did not imply or set as underlying assumption that there was any meta-historical factor that guided the process. In particular, Marsili tackles the meaning of *tian* 天 or Heaven in the Chinese context and compares it with the idea of Fortune in Polybius's *Histories*, as Polybius seemed to think that Fortune

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[1] *Liji*, *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 ed. (1815; reprint, Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1955), *juan* 46, p. 797.

steered Rome's destiny toward a unified and magnificent empire (p. 103). Here Marsili engages in a long discussion of the history of the idea of *tian* in early China, ending in Sima Qian's subtle and ironic presentations of various events that *de facto* refuted the role of Heaven in human affairs. According to Marsili, *tian* "is an empty word that can be used to glorify one's contingent aims or justify unexpected failure. It is connected to adaptability and receptiveness, rather than to constants and absolutes" (p. 126). In this way, Sima Qian and some other intellectuals did not really give the kind of extra-human status to *tian*, as the Abrahamic deity had acquired. As Marsili concludes, by demonstrating the nonteleological reality of historical events, both Polybius and *Shiji* concur that political unification did not necessarily coincide with the establishment of any superior justice over the empire.

Chapter 4, "Time, Myth, and Memory," continues the comparison between Han and Rome. A number of key terms are examined: divine kings, gods, saints, sages, ancestors, immortals, Yellow Emperor, alchemy, and the ritual of *fengshan* 封禪. Marsili compares the emergence of the Roman idea of divine kingship throughout the reign of Augustus and pointed out why the Han rulers could not as easily exploit the extra-human powers for political purposes. This difficulty shows clearly in the ritual of *fengshan*, sacrifice to the Heaven in order to gain political legitimacy. The narrative by Sima Qian about this event, however, subtly but effectively dismantled this intended purpose. Of course, by this time, political legitimacy was probably not the foremost concern of Emperor Wu. Instead, seeking for immortality, with the blessing of Heaven through the performance of the *fengshan* ritual, was more likely the real purpose of the act. However, there is a twist to Marsili's discourse to Emperor Wu's allegedly superstitious and credulous mind regarding ghosts and spirits: "we cannot exclude the possibility that he [Emperor Wu] actually conceived of a different model of sovereignty" (p. 171). This different model is a deliberate disregard of the time-honoured ancient texts and traditions. This, of course, ties in with the fact that throughout Emperor Wu's reign, people with Confucian learning did not have any obvious influence at his court, despite Dong Zhongshu's 董仲舒 success.

Chapter 5, "Place and Ritual," compares Han and Rome on the function of religious festivals, in particular the need to hear the voice of the people on the part of Rome but not so in Han. In contrast to the Roman buildings of temples, there was no display of public monuments in Han. This observation is in consistent with the understanding that whereas in Rome the emperor needs to go to the crowd to be with people, in China the emperor is shielded from the public. Marsili also makes an important observation about why in Rome the emperor Augustus eventually gained the status of a god, while in China the emperor did not. Marsili linked this to the fact that the Roman Empire was built from a single city, while the Qin-Han empire was the amalgamation of diverse pre-existing powers, and neither the Qin nor the Han

was from the former Central states. In the extra-human realm, again, pre-imperial and regional traditions concerning ghosts and spirits did not occupy a pivotal position in the legitimation of hereditary rule (p. 200). The tomb of the Han emperors may be an important site, but only for the royal family. The spirit of the deceased emperors were never the protectors of the state. Emperor Wu's ritual inconsistency was not a conscious decision that allowed him to address different publics and social groups. Wu's rituals of space ceremonies was a propagandistic strategy intended to validate his rulership in terms of centralized control over different territories.

As Marsili argues, Emperor Wu's personal involvement in popular cults, either by attending them in situ, or by relocating or reproducing them in the imperial park, was consistent with his plan to seek political allies outside the court. His interest in seeking out self-declared experts in alchemy, immortality, spirits, and ghosts can be interpreted as a disguised intention to challenge the influence of the Classicists by filling the court with people who did not share Confucius's political, social, and moral vision (p. 177). Thus Marsili proposes that Emperor Wu's indulgence in the pursuit of ghosts, spirits, and immortality was probably not a mere intellectual lapse or superstition (as many modern scholars tend to think), but a calculated political move, to curb the influence of the old court aristocrats and powerful local kingdoms. This view, a logical assumption that tries to comprehend the apparent contradiction in Emperor Wu's behaviours, certainly provides a more holistic view to understand Emperor Wu as a person and as a politician or strategist. It would be a subject for further inquiry in how far we could further substantiate this view with more concrete evidence, however difficult it may be. An alternative to Marsili's view, of course, is not to assume that Emperor Wu had a comprehensive plan for utilizing the promotion of ghosts and spirits to counter the more conservative forces at court. He simply played along as things developed. Sima Qian, as a bystander and recorder and synthesizer of events, left with us what he thought was useful, and it is obvious that the issue is far from being settled.

To sum up, just as we pick what we are interested in and able to make sense out of the *Shiji*, this brief review can only bring up some aspects of this rich and fascinating book, which this reviewer likes to share with the readers. I have not dealt in detail with the very important mission of the book: to understand Han China better through comparison with Rome. It will take much longer than an essay to do full justice to the method and result such a comparison entails. Suffice it to say that Marsili has given us an exciting example of how to do comparison on a certain topic. For comparative antiquity is still an uncharted territory despite some recent works. What are the criteria for comparison, how a topic is to be chosen, and why the topic is a suitable one in a particular historical context are questions that each comparative enterprise needs to confront and resolve. As for the inevitable question, "to compare,

or not to compare?," one can only answer positively when comparative exercise could produce new understandings, which, without comparison, would not easily be achieved.

Finally, inspired by and as a tribute to Marsili's magnificent work, I was able to reread some passages in the *Shiji*, which I thought I had understood but actually did not, and came up with the following observation. It has to do with the understanding of the term *shenjun* 神君 , which Marsili elaborated on in the concluding chapter. This term appears in the *Shiji* in two places, all in *juan* 28, "The Treatise on the Feng and Shan Sacrifices." Here it might be useful to quote the two entire passages with my translation.

> 明年，今上初至雍，郊見五畤。後常三歲一郊。是時上求神君，舍之上林中蹏氏觀。神君者，長陵女子，以子死，見神於先後宛若。宛若祠之其室，民多往祠。平原君往祠，其後子孫以尊顯。及今上即位，則厚禮置祠之內中。聞其言，不見其人云。
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> The next year [133 B.C.E., i.e., the eighth year of Emperor Wu's reign, two years after the death of the Dowager Empress Dou 竇太后, Emperor Wu's grandmother], the present emperor went to Yong for the first time and sacrificed to the Five Altars. Afterwards [the emperor] would as a rule make sacrifice every three years. At the time, the emperor was seeking for *shenjun* [lit. honourable spirit], to be housed in the Tishi Shrine in the Shanglin Park. This so-called *shenjun* was a woman from Changling who died of childbirth, and her spirit [*shen*] appeared to her sister-in-law Wanruo. Wanruo thus made a shrine for her in her [Wanruo's] home, and many people went to make sacrifice. The Princess of Pingyuan [i.e., Emperor Wu's maternal grandmother] went to make sacrifice, thereafter her descendants became illustrious because of it. When the present emperor ascended the throne, he bestowed rich ritual gift and placed that in the inner chamber of the shrine. It is said that people could hear her talk, but could not see the person.[2]
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> 文成死明年，天子病鼎湖甚，巫醫無所不致，不愈。游水發根言上郡有巫，病而鬼神下之。上召置祠之甘泉。及病，使人問神君。神君言曰：「天子無憂病。病少愈，彊與我會甘泉。」於是病愈，遂起，幸甘泉，病良已。大赦，置壽宮神君。壽宮神君最貴者太一，其佐曰大禁、司命之屬，皆從之。非可得見，聞其言，言與人音等。時去時來，來則風肅然。居室帷中。時晝言，

[2] Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), *juan* 28, p. 1384. Another version is in *Shiji juan* 12, pp. 452–53, with only a very slight difference. This version is taken from *juan* 28 by a later editor to fill in as "The Chronicle of Emperor Wu."

然常以夜。天子祓，然後入。因巫為主人，關飲食。所以言，行下。又置壽宮、北宮，張羽旗，設供具，以禮神君。神君所言，上使人受書其言，命之曰「畫法」。其所語，世俗之所知也，無絕殊者，而天子心獨喜。其事祕，世莫知也。

The year after Wencheng died [120 B.C.E.], the Son of Heaven was very sick while at Dinghu. All the *wu*-shamans and physicians were summoned, with no effect. Youshui Fagen mentioned that there was a *wu* at Shangjun, who could be possessed by ghosts and spirits when sick. The Emperor ordered to establish a shrine for him at Ganquan. When the *wu* became sick [i.e., possessed by spirits], the Emperor ordered attendant to seek advice from the *shenjun*. The *shenjun* said, “The Son of Heaven should not worry about illness. The illness will be gone soon, and be sure to meet me at Ganquan.” Then the illness was gone; the Emperor was able to rise, and travelled to Ganquan, as the illness was completely gone. Grand amnesty was granted, and the *shenjun* of Shougong was established. The most honourable *shenjun* at Shougong was Taiyi, whose assistants were Dajin and Siming and others, who were all in attendance. They could not be seen. When their voice was heard, it was the same as the human voice. They would come and go at will; when they come there would be swift wind, and they would reside behind the drapes in the chamber. They sometimes spoke in the day time, but often during the night. The Son of Heaven would purify himself before entering. The *wu* would be acting as the host and provide food and drink. What was said [during the meeting with the *shenjun*] was transmitted and followed. Then Shougong and Beigong were established, with winged banners and offering tables to honour the *shenjun*. When *shenjun* spoke, the Emperor ordered attendants to write down the words, and called them “*huafa*” [meaning uncertain]. What they said was known to the common people, and nothing out of the ordinary. But the Son of Heaven alone liked it. The matter was a secret and was unknown to the world.[3]

With the above two paragraphs, and the accompanying translation, I hope to make several points: (1) The term *shenjun* was a generic title referring to an “honourable spirit,” or efficacious spirit. The woman of Changling was called *shenjun* because her spirit was considered efficacious. This *shenjun* was not the same as the *shenjun* mentioned in the context of Emperor Wu’s illness at Dinghu. It is clear that the *shenjun* that possessed the *wu*-shaman was not the woman from Changling, but the spirits

[3] *Shiji*, *juan* 28, pp. 1388–89.

called Taiyi, and his assistants like Dajin and Simin. (2) The shrine of the *shenjun* of the woman from Changling was located in the Shanglin Park, while the shrine of the *shenjun* that possessed the *wu* from Shangjun was located at Shougong at Ganquan. (3) The *shenjun* of the woman of Changling was worshipped by Emperor Wu's maternal grandmother Princess Pingyuan; thus, it was before Emperor Wu became the emperor. His honouring this *shenjun* was probably a way to honour his maternal grandmother and also to confirm the saying that because Princess Pingyuan worshipped this *shenjun*, her descendants, including her daughter, Emperor Wu's mother, her three sons who were all granted the ranks of *hou*-marquis, and of course Emperor Wu himself, were all illustrious and most exalted people under heaven. (4) The *shenjun* of Changling did not have any direct contact with Emperor Wu, whereas the *shenjun* of Shougong predicted his recovery from illness. Thus, it is reasonable that Emperor Wu paid more attention to the *shenjun* of Shougong and noted down their words as precious guidance. (5) The motivation of Sima Qian in including these two events was probably not much different from his motivation in writing the entire "Treatise on the Feng and Shan Sacrifices," with a purposefully ironic intention to "let the facts speak for themselves," to show the massive gullibility, even the fragile mental state, of Emperor Wu regarding things extra-human. In this connection, one wonders whether the famous case of witchcraft, the tragedy that wrapped up the reign of Emperor Wu, should be weighed together, although Sima Qian did not seem to have witnessed it.

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