

***Literate Community in Early Imperial China: The Northwestern Frontier in Han Times.*** By Charles Sanft. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019. Pp. xxiii + 252. \$90.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

This new study by Charles Sanft can be viewed as a sequel to his previous book, *Communication and Cooperation in Early Imperial China: Publicizing the Qin Dynasty*, published in 2014, also with the State University of New York Press. The chronological relationship between the two—*Communication and Cooperation* deals with the first centralized Chinese empire of Qin (221–207 B.C.E.), while the *Literate Community* explores the frontier society in the subsequent Han Empire (202 B.C.E.–C.E. 220)—is immediately obvious, but the continuity does not stop there. The two books are concerned with the social and cultural implications and consequences of the emergence of bureaucratic empire in ancient China. Sanft's focus throughout both studies is on the commoner subjects' reaction to imperial policies, be it self-legitimizing propaganda, bureaucratic administration, or military conscription that brought thousands of Han farmers to the desert uplands of Inner Asia.

Insofar as the conditions and experiences of the non-elite members of early imperial society are but marginally reflected in the transmitted historical records, Sanft relies on the archaeological evidence, particularly the written documents excavated from residential, military, and burial sites across China during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The remains of Han fortification lines along the northwestern frontier in the present-day Gansu Province and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region yielded tens of thousands of inscribed wooden tablets that scholars used to study the organization of military and administrative apparatus, historical geography, ethnic and environmental history, and foreign relations of the Han Empire, among other subjects.<sup>1</sup> But, first and foremost, these documents shed light on the life of the community of frontier servicemen and their families, and it is this “literate community” that Sanft sets off to investigate in his new book.

While this is not explicitly stated by the author himself, one broader theme that pervades both his books is that of the imperial society: its formation, functioning, and its very definition. As many other fields of early China studies, research into

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<sup>1</sup> For one of the early studies of these documents that remains the standard reference to the present day is Michael Loewe, *Records of Han Administration* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967). For a more recent introduction, see Loewe, “Wood and Bamboo Administrative Documents of the Han Period,” in Edward L. Shaughnessy, ed., *New Sources of Early Chinese History: An Introduction to the Reading of Inscriptions and Manuscripts* (Berkeley, CA: Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1997), pp. 161–92.

the social history of ancient empires of Qin and Han has been powerfully stimulated by archaeological discoveries of the past decades. Excavated documents and inscriptions may be providing the most straightforward evidence on how the local societies throughout the empire were being transformed by their engagement with the state-sponsored institutions and practices, of which literacy was one. They also make it clear that these encounters were by no means restricted to educated elites. On the other hand, archaeologists are beginning to approach the non-written material with questions about the local reactions to imperialism; adoption of and resistance to the imperial culture; the nature, means, and dynamics of state control; and the meaning of such well-established yet poorly defined terms as “acculturation” or “Sinicization.”<sup>2</sup>

Such attention to actions and behaviours of local actors resonates with Sanft’s interest in the contexts of text production, circulation, and reception, in what the Han frontier servicemen and their family members were actually doing with the texts, and in the ways this engagement affected their lives. He is sceptical about the conventional interpretation of the social impacts of written culture in terms of levels of individual literacy since it is based on the modern definition of literacy that correspond poorly to the actual ways in which people interacted with texts in early imperial China and in other ancient societies.

As in his previous book, Sanft builds upon the cross-disciplinary insights to advance a new perspective on literacy that is congruent with ancient evidence. He borrows inspiration from neuroscientists who interpret the development of writing and the process of learning how to read as an instance of “human brain’s built-in ability to recognize and interpret forms in the natural environment” (on p. 12, which, curiously, echoes the traditional Chinese interpretation of the origins of writing from the natural “signs” such as the bird and animal footprints); and psycholinguistics that claims reading to be “just another form of learning, and that learning is both natural and universal among human beings” (p. 13). Sanft concludes that, far from being part of a hermetic elite culture, engagement with texts is something to be expected from the general populace provided they routinely encountered written material in their everyday comings and goings. In early imperial China, such opportunity was

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Francis Allard, “Frontiers and Boundaries: The Han Empire from its Southern Periphery,” in Miriam T. Stark, ed., *Archaeology of Asia* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 233–54; Alice Yao, *The Ancient Highlands of Southwest China: From the Bronze Age to the Han Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Xiaotong Wu, Anke Hein, Xingxiang Zhang, Zhengyao Jin, Dong Wei, Fang Huang, and Xijie Yin, “Resettlement Strategies and Han Imperial Expansion into Southwest China: A Multimethod Approach to Colonialism and Migration,” *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* 11, no. 12 (December 2019), pp. 6751–81, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12520-019-00938-w>.

offered by the work of bureaucratic government that reached out all the way to grass-roots communities and individual households through the mechanisms of household registration, tax collection, labour conscription, and administration of justice.<sup>3</sup>

For Sanft, interaction with texts in early imperial China was fundamentally a community-based process. This makes his perspective on the social life of writing different from the individual-based approach, which sees literacy as individual ability to read and to write. According to Sanft, it is a community, not an individual that is an adequate unit of analysis if one is to understand how literacy functioned in the ancient societies. In particular, he argues that reading and writing are very different in terms of skills and abilities involved and should not be conflated under an overarching category of “literacy.” Instead, Sanft proposes an alternative term, “interaction with texts,” which does not presuppose each individual’s ability to both produce and read texts at all levels of complexity. Interaction involved the essentially “illiterate,” oral forms of engagement with written materials such as dictation and listening. In Sanft’s own words, it existed on a spectrum, “which in early China ranged from people who could read and write everything to those who depended on others for all reading and all writing” (p. 160).

An individual’s location on this spectrum could and did change in the course of his or her life, being shaped by the community that included people with various levels of literacy. They interacted with each other in order to make sense and use of written documents, some of which had utilitarian value while others presented a welcome diversion from the pressures and monotony of frontier garrison life. Within this community, individuals with varying social backgrounds and degrees of literacy shared the text-centred networks and activities that affected their lifestyles and opportunities. Even though many of its members might have had a very limited reading and no writing capacity, the community as a whole was “literate” in the sense that “the text came to constitute the center of the community, a means for it to communicate and to function” (p. 23).

In line with its interest in the contexts of people’s engagement with the written materials, six of the eight book chapters are devoted to specific types of documents that correlate to the types of interaction with texts. These include collective reading and interpretation of posted texts; dictation and written recording of oral statements;

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<sup>3</sup> One of the most thorough Western-language discussions of the impact of bureaucratic administration in the Qin and Han Empires on literacy among the general populace is Robin D. S. Yates, “Soldiers, Scribes, and Women: Literacy among the Lower Orders in Early China,” in Li Feng and David Prager Branner, eds., *Writing and Literacy in Early China: Studies from the Columbia Early China Seminar* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2011), pp. 339–69.

and assembling the fragments of discrete documents to produce a composite text that served the goals of its creator. Such an approach allows Sanft to introduce a broad variety of texts that have so far rarely been discussed as a corpus reflective of literary culture of the frontier community. It also lets the author drive home his arguments about the functioning of literate community and its connections to the broader imperial society.

One such topic is the relationship between the spoken and the written in the early Chinese textual culture. It has been extensively addressed with regard to the late pre-imperial and early imperial intellectual traditions, where the textual variations in “philosophical” and “literary” manuscripts were sometimes interpreted as an outcome of oral transmission;<sup>4</sup> and in the context of bureaucratic administration, which was demonstrated to have heavily relied on oral communication and transformation of oral statements by both officials and commoners into formal documents that could then be deployed in decision-making and accounting processes.<sup>5</sup> Sanft demonstrates that such interplay between writing and orality was not limited to literary and bureaucratic contexts but was intrinsic to people’s interaction with written texts in early China at all levels of the society and for all purposes. It is key to understanding how writing came to play such an important role as a source of authority, conduit of social mobility, and instrument of engagement with the broader world in a society where the vast majority of population did not qualify as literate by the modern standards.

Another key theme of the book is the community. Here Sanft contributes to the discussion about the social contexts of textual production and transmission, which has been central to the research on literacy in ancient China at least since the publication of Mark Edward Lewis’s magisterial work on the relationship between writing and authority in early China.<sup>6</sup> As production of writing became dissociated from ancestral rituals during the Eastern Zhou period (771–221 B.C.E.), its circulation was increasingly carried out within specialized communities, some of which eventually became “philosophical” schools, or traditions, while others evolved into groups of

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Martin Kern, “The *Odes* in Excavated Manuscripts,” in idem, ed., *Text and Ritual in Early China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), pp. 149–93; Dirk Meyer, *Philosophy on Bamboo: Text and the Production of Meaning in Early China* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 20–22.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Bu Xianqun 卜憲群, “Cong jianbo kan Qin Han xiangli de wenshu wenti” 從簡帛看秦漢鄉里的文書問題 (Administrative documents at the district and community level during the Qin and Han periods as reflected in the excavated materials), *Wenshizhe* 文史哲, 2007, no. 6, pp. 48–53.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), esp. pp. 63–97.

professional administrators.<sup>7</sup> So far, the discussion of these “literate communities” was primarily limited to those associated with what may be called the elite texts, the complex discourses on abstract matters that required high degree of literary and intellectual sophistication.<sup>8</sup> Sanft argues that during the Han era, participation in a text-centred community was not restricted to individuals with specific social, cultural and/or professional backgrounds. Compared to the Eastern Zhou literate communities, the imperial ones were more inclusive, and they formed around a broader range of texts.

This, Sanft suggests, was largely due to the distinctive socio-political context for the development of “textual civilization” in China, the bureaucracy. Many texts available to the frontier residents, such as the official instructions on signalling, imperial edicts, and legal records were the products of bureaucratic government. Other texts created in the literate community were extensively quoting official proclamations. Even private letters of the frontier servicemen utilized “the common mode of bureaucratic writing” (p. 152). Indeed, the majority of texts excavated from the Han frontier fortifications were official documents, and this probably cannot be explained away as a vicissitude of material preservation. As Sanft observes, official documents might have been among the first texts that conscripts encountered on their arrival to the garrisons, and the officers, scribes, or other administrators were the only available instructors “who could teach or at least answer questions and read aloud to them” (p. 21). Ubiquity of these texts and their relevance to various social groups determined inclusivity of the literate community at the north-western frontier.

Although Sanft contrasts the bureaucratic model for the spread of literate culture to the one centred on religious institutions prevalent, for example, in medieval Europe (pp. xi–xii), this might be a false opposition so far as ancient China is concerned. Late Warring States religious practices made much use of texts such as prognostication manuals, prayers, and spells, and many people might actually have encountered texts in this context. Yet these “religious” manuscripts appear to have been strongly influenced by contemporary bureaucratic practices and cannot therefore be considered

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<sup>7</sup> Evolution of writing in the context of socio-cultural transition during the Eastern Zhou era has recently been discussed in Lothar von Falkenhausen, “An Economic Perspective on the Rise of Early Chinese Historiographic Genres” (paper presented at the conference, “Rethinking Early Chinese Historiography,” Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 12–16 May 2019).

<sup>8</sup> This is the case of Mark Lewis’s analysis of scholarly traditions in *Writing and Authority*. For another example, see Dirk Meyer, “Texts, Textual Communities, and Meaning: The *Genius Loci* of the Warring States Chǔ Tomb Guōdiàn One,” *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 63, no. 4 (2009), pp. 827–56.

isolated from the official uses of writing.<sup>9</sup> The new type of state that emerged in East Asia during the Warring States era (453–221 B.C.E.) and reached maturity under the early empires played a pivotal role in the emergence of literary communities such as the one explored in Sanft’s book, and the ways in which it did so were not limited to the operation of the state itself.

At the outset of his study, Sanft emphasizes the intention to focus on community rather than “society,” the latter being too diverse to be meaningfully discussed on the basis of localized textual corpus he is dealing with. In the conclusion to his book, however, he attempts to outline the broader connections between the north-western frontier region and the empire as a whole (pp. 164–67). Unfortunately, his conclusions do not go beyond what has already been observed by other students of servicemen literacy at the Han Northwest, namely that the conscription system led to dissemination of written culture acquired by the garrison recruits across much of the empire.<sup>10</sup> While it stands to reason that on their return home, ex-soldiers were making use of their newly acquired experiences of interacting with texts, contexts and consequences of them doing so by and large remain unexplored in Sanft’s book besides the rather general statement that “there is every reason to expect that the social effects of that interaction [with texts] were still pervasive” (p. 167).

Scholars of pre-modern empires have long paid attention to the frontiers as crucial sites for the formation and reproduction of social and economic structures of

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<sup>9</sup> For the bureaucratic influence on the Warring States popular religion, see, for example, Donald Harper, “Resurrection in Warring States Popular Religion,” *Taoist Resources* 5, no. 2 (December 1994), pp. 13–28; Guolong Lai, “Death and the Otherworldly Journey in Early China as Seen through Tomb Texts, Travel Paraphernalia, and Road Rituals,” *Asia Major*, 3rd ser., 18, no. 1 (2005), pp. 1–44; Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BC): The Archaeological Evidence* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2006), pp. 318–21; Alain Thote, “Daybooks in Archaeological Context,” in Donald Harper and Marc Kalinowski, eds., *Books of Fate and Popular Culture in Early China: The Daybook Manuscripts of the Warring States, Qin, and Han* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 11–56.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Hsing I’tien 邢義田, “Handai biansai lizu de jun zhong jiaoyu: Du *Juyan xinjian zhaji zhi san*” 漢代邊塞吏卒的軍中教育——讀《居延新簡》札記之三 (Army education among the officers and soldiers at the frontier during the Han era: Reading notes on the *New Documents from Juyan*, part 3), in Li Xueqin 李學勤, ed., *Jianbo yanjiu* 簡帛研究 (Studies on the bamboo and silk manuscripts) 2 (Beijing: Falü chubanshe, 1996), pp. 273–78; and Ji Annuo 紀安諾 (Enno Giele), “Handai biansai beiyong shuxie cailiao ji qi shehuishi yiyi” 漢代邊塞備用書寫材料及其社會史意義 (Writing materials at the Han frontier fortifications and their significance for social history), in Wuhan daxue jianbo yanjiu zhongxin 武漢大學簡帛研究中心, ed., *Jianbo* 簡帛 (Bamboo and silk) 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), pp. 475–500.

the empire.<sup>11</sup> As early as the first century B.C.E., the Western Han officials recognized the relationship between the frontier and interior regions as the key subject of imperial politics, and modern scholars largely agree with them.<sup>12</sup> Along with the metropolitan region, frontiers were the “state spaces” *par excellence*, the areas where the influence of the state was most pronounced in terms of settlement pattern, social and economic organization, and the numbers of state personnel.<sup>13</sup> These were the loci where new types of communities were created focusing on empire-sponsored institutions such as bureaucracy with its documents and infrastructure for circulating information, monetized markets that developed around the centres of state or state-related consumption, or the official learning, as exemplified by the community of classicist scholars that converged on emperors’ capital for the fulfilment of their political and social ambition.

While Sanft mentions the relationship between the written culture of the north-western frontier, in particular with regard to what he calls the “cultural texts,” on one hand, and the “larger literate world of Han China” (p. 138), on the other, he stops short of grounding his case study of a state-sponsored community in the broader problematics of social impact of the empire. One may be sympathetic with Sanft’s cautious attitude. However, some readers will possibly be left with the sense of a missed opportunity for such a discussion, especially as the north-western frontier community is no longer standing out as a uniquely well-documented. Recent mass finds of documents from the Qin and Han eras at what used to be the southern periphery of the empire, particularly in the present-day Hunan Province, reflect the life of local “literate communities” at the similar level of detail. One may hope that

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<sup>11</sup> For the role of the frontiers in the imperial state formation, see, for example, C. R. Whittaker, *Rome and Its Frontiers: The Dynamics of Empire* (London: Routledge, 2004); and David Ludden, “The Process of Empire: Frontiers and Borderlands,” in Peter Fibiger Bang and C.A. Bayly, eds., *Tributary Empires in Global History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 132–50.

<sup>12</sup> This is one of the central topics of the court debate on economic and military policy that took place in 81 B.C.E. and was recorded in the *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 (Debate on salt and iron) by Huan Kuan 桓寬 (first century B.C.E.). See Wang Liqi 王利器, ed., *Yantie lun jiaozhu* 鹽鐵論校注 (Discourse on salt and iron, edited and annotated), in *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* 新編諸子集成 (Newly compiled collection of ancient philosophical texts) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992). For the English translation, see Esson M. Gale, *Discourses on Salt and Iron: A Debate on State Control of Commerce and Industry in Ancient China* (Leiden: Brill, 1931).

<sup>13</sup> James Scott refers to “state” and “nonstate spaces” to differentiate between the ecologies conducive to the formation of centralized states and those that favoured acephalous societies that lacked unified political leadership. See James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

in his future research, Sanft capitalizes on the present excellent study to develop a synthetic, bottom-up perspective on early imperial China as experienced by the communities that empires encountered, transformed, or created.

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***Efficacious Underworld: The Evolution of Ten Kings Paintings in Medieval China and Korea.*** By Cheeyun Lilian Kwon. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2019. Pp. viii + 211. \$72,00.

In her book, Cheeyun Lilian Kwon describes how pictures of the Ten Kings of the Underworld first appeared in the Dunhuang caves in China, reached Korea in the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) and developed here into an outstanding genre of religious painting, frequently used as parts of funerary rituals.

The Ten Kings cult originated in medieval China, where the existing cult surrounding death was combined with imported South Asian and Central Asian ideas to form a unique vision of the afterlife. According to this doctrine, ten infernal kings who each assessed the sins of the dead ultimately judged every action in life. This unique system of thought, which combined existing Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian beliefs, took on concrete forms in ninth-century China and soon after spread to Korea and Japan. The earliest images of the Ten Kings are found in the tenth-century sutra, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings* (*Shiwang jing* 十王經), known to be the work of the monk, Zangchuan 藏川.

In the first part of *Efficacious Underworld*, “Evolution of Ten Kings Paintings in China,” the author shows that from the tenth century on we have numerous records of the Ten Kings depicted together with Kṣitigarbha, who originated in India and is the bodhisattva saving those in hell. Some of the existing examples from these early times are printed in the book, including pictures from the Stein Collection (British Museum), the Pelliot Collection (Bibliothèque de France), the Musée Guimet in Paris, as well as from the Dunhuang caves.

Another category of Ten Kings paintings emerged in the tenth century: handscroll illustrations in the narrative mode, based on the Ten Kings sutra. These handscrolls were unrolled and shown to the public to instruct or entertain them. The author also describes the former Packard Set, a set of the Ten Kings painted on ten hanging