

to take notice of the regional kings and has uncovered enough of their story so that we can no longer ignore them. As a result, *Screen of Kings* significantly expands our perception of what constitutes art patronage and production during this period of Chinese history and, more importantly, starts to rebalance our notions of what might matter about Ming China.

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***The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy.*** By Yuri Pines. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. Pp. vii + 245. \$39.50/£27.95.

Professor Pines writes with the benefit of wide and deep reading that enables him to survey the intellectual, political, and social background against which kingdoms and then empires were founded, maintained, declined, and closed from the time of the Warring States until the modern age. His theme is that of the continued search for an ideal, of unification, seen as unique among the cultures of the world. He considers the parts played by different types of individual in fostering this ideal and enacting it in the process of government, with its blessings and restraints. These included the monarchs themselves, their advisors who were the privileged and prominent men of learning, local leaders arising in the provinces, and the people themselves who were subject to such authorities.

The book raises a number of questions to which answers may or may not be forthcoming. Historians may ask in what ways the term “everlasting” can properly be applied to any concept or institution devised by man. They may also seek a clear distinction between empires and other types of regime such as kingdoms. Necessarily they need satisfaction that the questions which the book raises may be properly put to the sources that are available. While unity is seen and treated as a concept, it requires consideration in the light of the actual development of institutions and the practice of rulership. Questions arise of how far the person of an emperor was essential to the maintenance of an empire; of the differing views that individuals of different types and social strata might take of an emperor’s function and duties, or of the imposition of a unity.

The choice of a title for the short book that covers this great theme immediately raises questions. Readers whose view of human institutions is accompanied by an adherence to Jewish or Christian beliefs may ponder whether the idea of “everlasting”

is applicable. Some historians may ask for a definition of “empire” that distinguishes it from other forms of monarchy. They read part of a description that is cited from Goldstone and Haldon which identifies the empire as “a territory . . . ruled from a distinct organizational center . . . with clear ideological and political sway over varied elite, who in turn exercise power over a population in which a majority have neither access to nor influence over position of imperial power” (p. 186, n. 14).<sup>1</sup> It may be asked for what historical situations in China this description, as cited, is valid, and whether it may be taken to include all the characteristic elements seen in China’s empires. As a definition it can hardly apply, elsewhere, to what has been known as the Athenian Empire; and it does not include attributes of, for example, the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Readers perhaps need a reminder of the great variety among China’s imperial regimes; some were of sufficient scope to claim submission by and exercise of supreme authority over a number of peoples of widely differing religious beliefs, ethnic origins, and economic practices, with each one being capable of setting up its own system of government. Others, which existed in confined areas whose inhabitants were far more united in these respects, were of a somewhat different category and did not face the same problems as those of the first category. One thinks of the contrast between Han, Tang, Ming, and Qing on the one hand, and Shu-Han (221–263) or the Chen dynasty (557–589) on the other.

The book is very properly addressed to readers who may not necessarily have received a deep training in China’s history, and who may need gentle reminders of some of its basic conditions. Some readers may get the impression from the book that stable unity and well asserted government were the norm, operating in equal measure and with equally strong acknowledgement over the length and breadth of the lands. Professor Pines does indeed take account of the times when no such conditions prevailed and these may seem to be treated as temporary interruptions in a general mode of existence. Other historians might well handle the subject from the opposite approach, seeing occasions and periods when unity was achieved effectively as being anything but the norm, and short-lived rather than long-lasting. It would be an error, for example, for readers to assume that controlled and effective unity persisted throughout the centuries’ long dynasties of Western Han, Eastern Han or Tang; or that such strength marked the whole of the two and a half centuries of the Qing dynasty; and while these “lapses” are indeed mentioned in the book they perhaps deserve greater stress than they are given. Nor should readers be oblivious of the long periods

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<sup>1</sup> Jack A. Goldstone and John F. Haldon, “Ancient States, Empires and Exploitation: Problems and Perspectives,” in Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel, eds., *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 3–29.

when two or more regimes had arisen to exist simultaneously, as occurred between the Western Jin and Sui empires, or in the Five Dynasties that followed Tang. Taken altogether, the periods when imperial government was by no means entirely effective and those when government was split between different regimes may have lasted for perhaps a third of the whole length of time when imperial government persisted.

One of the main problems in assessing the power and initiative of the emperors lies in the uneven nature and extent of the historical sources, such that it may not be possible to ask the same question, from one period to the next. These accounts cannot always be expected to ascribe the success of certain decisions to the ministers who were advising their sovereign and had indeed been responsible for putting forward the ideas that lay behind them. Some officials could speak or write with the benefit of long experience in administering the empire; or of personal contact with the conditions under which part of the population was living and suffering; or by serving as soldiers who had been waging war in harsh conditions of terrain or climate. Very few emperors were equipped in these ways and it would be incorrect to credit most of them with the ability to form political decisions on the basis of personal knowledge.

Readers may need a reminder that for much of the imperial period the histories were compiled by junior scholar-officials, appointed to be members of an imperial commission. Their motives were tempered by the obligations of loyalty to the regime that they served; their task lay in glorifying the imperial regime and its masters. Professor Pines partly recognizes this problem, in writing that “under most dynasties . . . the emperors’ weakness rather than excessive authoritarianism was the rule” (p. 64). As with other empires, we may look in vain for attempts at writing history objectively; and we are conscious of the need to differentiate, in what we read, between what is ideal, mythical, formal, and prescriptive, and what may be accepted as real, factual, practical, and descriptive.

Our sources may not always reveal how the ideas of monarchy that were entertained by scholars and men of learning were followed in practice. Certainly for the earlier periods there is a dearth of archive which might perhaps fill in the picture. But unwary readers require some warning of these difficulties, as of those presented by the evidence of passages taken from the most highly honoured literary texts of the day. Without such a warning, a reader may easily take these to be describing the real conditions of an age rather than alluding to an idealised situation that may never have existed.<sup>2</sup>

In taking his readers striding through the centuries Professor Pines may be crediting them with a deeper knowledge of China’s history that they may have acquired.

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., see a citation from the *Li ji*, on p. 144.

A search for and practice of unity must be seen against what may almost be termed several patterns that appear and re-appear. First, there were occasions when a short lived innovative dynasty was followed by a much longer lasting regime that adopted its predecessor's experiments and operated their systems, e.g., of taxation, on an ever widening scale. Such a sequence may be seen with Qin and Han, Sui and Tang and perhaps with Yuan and Ming. Secondly, the achievement of unity must be assessed against a pattern that emerged in several of the longer lasting dynasties, that of an initial show of strength and unity, followed by the collapse of control and a rise of subversive movements, as in Eastern Han and Tang. In addition major swings of balance affect the question; that from one where the fount of authority was centred in the north-west (e.g., at Chang'an 長安) to move to the east, first in Song, at Kaifeng 開封 and later to the city that is now known as Beijing. A second such change occurred in the extent of territories that were under control. In the Han empire, perhaps a tenth of the population that was registered was living south of the Yangzi River, under Tang it had risen to perhaps a quarter. A similar striking change occurred with the Song move to the south and the increasing importance, or perhaps even dominance, that the south was to exercise in economic terms.

The theme of unity and its perseverance is argued in terms of theoretical concepts and attention to persons as members of a class, such as the literati or the local elite, rather than as individual men and women with their own personalities. Other historians might take a somewhat different approach, by fastening on the part played by certain factors, religious, institutional, or behavioural whose features and application may be identified, changeable as their forms might have been. Much might perhaps be written about the force exercised by the importance placed in tracing a dynasty's descent, perhaps from a godlike hero; by the system of patrilineal succession to monarchs; by the unavoidable attention paid to hierarchy, in terms of kinship and administration; by a readiness to accept conscription as unavoidable; or by the fundamental part taken by ritual, whether at an imperial court, in central and provincial offices of government, in social structure or relationships within a family. It may be asked in what ways these and similar practices supported the formation of a unity or prejudiced its continuance, or imposed their own demands and restrictions.

There arises the question of what alternative means of government were or could have been under consideration in preference to that of the authority of a united and single dynasty and an autocratic emperor, and in discussing the behaviour of rebel groups Professor Pines recognizes its absence (p. 158). Unlike Japan, there was no concern that an emperor should be treated as being possessed of divine attributes; nor can we envisage a situation in which an emperor was obliged to follow the will of a majority. There are indeed numerous examples of occasions when an emperor sought the advice of his officials and listened to their opposing views before a decision of

policy was taken. In only a few cases, however, we may ask whether there is a hint of the possibility of the decision resting on the views of the greater number of those who were consulted. Perhaps we may see this when the question arose of whether Northern Wei should move its seat of government south to Luoyang 洛陽 (accomplished in 495). In the west we have been nurtured on the expression of political theory from Plato onwards and the practice of an open discussion of matters of state that has called for the powers of an orator; and it is with such a background in view that we judge the character or value of a regime. Such conditions did not prevail in China. We need must wait for long periods of time when imperial dynasties existed before we encounter serious attempts to discuss their intellectual basis, as known in Southern Song and argued by Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695) and Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682); and we may notice that those attempts followed the collapse of a dynasty and its replacement by the rule of a foreign house.

In all this there further arises a distinction that appears to be left unremarked in the book. We may know much about the ideology or intellectual restrictions on which officials rested their proposals and decisions; readers may need a reminder of the ideas put forward by men who stood outside the formation of imperial policy, such as Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (c. 198–c. 107 B.C.E.),<sup>3</sup> Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) or Gu Yanwu. Greater attention is perhaps due to the principal ways of thought that differed from that of wishing to impose a unified control of the population, such as a Daoist rejection of the restrictive nature of rulership, and a Buddhist search for the enlightenment of the individual. It would be useful to draw readers' attention to the types and occasions of conflict that such ideas might arouse, and the failure of such modes of thought or belief to undermine the practice of imperial government.

By no means all of China's emperors, perhaps only the exceptional few and certainly not those who were as yet infants, were able to judge the value of a proposal on the basis of personal acquaintance with the problem that was under discussion. An extreme view would be that of seeing the emperors as being no more than instruments in the hands of powerful and ambitious officials. However, the existence of an emperor was essential. Without him there would be no fount from which authority to govern the people derived. With no emperor there was no mechanism for the devolution of power to the many officials who carried out the ever present administrative tasks on which government depended. In such circumstances there could develop the compromise whereby a monarch reigned and officials governed,

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<sup>3</sup> No precise dates are given for Dong Zhongshu's life, often taken to be c. 179–c. 104 B.C.E. For various suggestions, see Michael Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu, a 'Confucian' Heritage and the Chunqiu fanlu* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 43.

and in which there might be a strong emperor with a sense of command, such as Tang Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626–649) or the Kangxi 康熙 emperor of Qing (r. 1661–1722), or the tenure of the throne by infants such as Pingdi 平帝 (emperor from 1 B.C.E. to C.E. 6) and the Xuantong 宣統 emperor of Qing (Puyi 溥儀; acceded 1908). Or else the effective control of the empire might fall into the hands of a dominating official such as Huo Guang 霍光 (d. 68 B.C.E.) or Heshen 和珅 (1750–1799).

We may sometimes meet the view, or hope, that, while holding supreme power, the emperor was subject to the ideal of *wuwei* 無為, action achieved without a positive resolve. Such a proposition well suited officials who were anxious to exert their own will in public matters. In all this process there remained the necessity of asserting in public the grounds on which an emperor rested his claim to legitimacy, the ancestry through which he received such a position and his dependence on a supra-human power from whom his own authority derived. The repeated occasions when the succession to the throne was subject to dispute could perhaps cast doubt on the validity of these claims.

Not all of China's emperors could succeed in claiming a direct link with their predecessors, as the examples of Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 8–23) or Daowudi 道武帝, first of the Toba Wei rulers (r. 386–409), may show. One may ask how such emperors conceived their rule and how far they could think in terms of a structure that was "everlasting." Officials who had seen the regime that they served fall into ruin may well have wondered wherein lay their duty; their loyalty to the last house could mean their refusal to serve the one that had brought it to ruin; their training in public service could mean that they should embrace a new regime and help it to govern the country for the benefit of its inhabitants. We may wonder in what way, assailed by such a conflict, they conceived the place and function of imperial rule; or how they were able to accept a compromise between an ideal of imperial rule and the ugly facts of its practice. One may wonder about the views of those who, being the subjects of government, paid their tax and suffered the demands and orders of officials. Could they have been expected to harbour a sense that they existed as members of "everlasting" empire, or a unity, or did they think no further than the need to satisfy the officials of whatever house it might be, Han, Wei, or Song, Sui or Tang? We may also ponder on the concept of empire that leaders of the non-Han peoples may have entertained, whether those of the communities of the deep south-west, the Muslim inhabitants of the north-west, or those who sprang either from the north-west or north-east to found their own empires in Luoyang or Yanjing 燕京. To what degree did the emperors and officials of the dynasties that ran between Han and Sui, or those that strove for existence after Tang, see themselves as parts of an "everlasting" unity? Or were they more conscious of the place that they took in the cycle described by a later writer as one in which "It is said that the state of the world is such that when it has



been divided for long it cannot but unite, and when it has been united for long it will surely be divided.”<sup>4</sup>

Professor Pines warns his readers that they may expect some broad generalizations and in a book of this purpose and size these cannot be avoided. They may nevertheless leave room for greater precision. The literati are treated as a “stratum” (p. 93), while some writers would hesitate to risk treating these men of learning as members of a single class or united group, fired by one and the same set of ambitions. Readers may likewise get the impression of the “local elite” as behaving in a uniform way (p. 109). The discussion of the relationship between the state and the local elite in Chapter 4 is couched in theoretical terms that at times leaves an historian looking for some flesh to put on the skeleton.

The acquisition of unity is seen as a goal of some of the thinkers of Zhanguo times, but how far this idea had penetrated the minds of those who ruled the kingdoms may not be known. All too frequently the writings of the Zhanguo relate propositions that are put to those rulers, who are painted as stupid or even backward, and incapable of taking note of anything but short-term plans.

The comparison of an emperor with the God of Judaism (p. 58) is basically flawed. God is omnipotent and without a superior; an emperor of China might claim to owe his authority to conferment from above. Thanks to his misdeeds an emperor might provoke certain reactions of the natural world; but he was in no way seen as a controlling power over the cosmos; and while he might be seen or expected to be a moral exemplar, he had no part as the donor or formulator of sacred and unalterable rules of ethics. An emperor of China took his place within social hierarchies of humanity; God stands above them. A further misapprehension may arise over the “exclusion of the lower strata from political processes” (p. 139), in so far as participation of a monarch’s subjects in such matters derives from western approaches to matters of public concern which are hard to find in Chinese sources.

Professor Pines deserves our thanks for writing a book that will provoke deep consideration of some of the basic problems with which China’s rulers have had to grapple. His analysis of the problems that were at stake and were so clearly live issues that China’s historians felt no need to identify them, can only clarify the understanding of teachers and students. In the comments that are seen above, the present writer is well aware that he is accustomed to addressing the subject from a somewhat different point of view. He has reserves about treating it in terms of groups or classes of individuals, as in the division of the book into chapters of “The Monarch,” “The Literati,” and “The Local Elite.” His preference would be to identify

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<sup>4</sup> See the opening sentence of the *Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三國志演義.

occasions or activities of repetitive occurrence and the causes from which they grew, and to determine their significance and effect in transforming a minor regime into a major empire. The author identifies occasions for the failure, threat or even breakdown of an imperial regime; as elsewhere in the book his points and conclusions would be more impressive if, at the cost of some lengthening, they were accompanied with more specific examples of how these processes were worked out.

There are a few points of technical criticism.

The description of Han Emperor Wu 漢武帝 as “the single most energetic Han ruler” (p. 35) follows traditional Chinese historiography, but it is difficult to identify precisely the powers of leadership, determination and resolve with which this emperor influenced decisions of state.

We read that “In November 1565, a minor official, Hai Rui (d. 1587), submitted a scandalous memorandum to the Ming emperor Shizong (r. 1521–1566). The document went far beyond the limits of acceptable remonstrance, as it did not focus on a single fault of the monarch but rather condemned his behavior in its entirety” (p. 97). This should not be seen as something that was without parallel. Another occasion when a critic expressed just such an emphatic judgement of his emperor’s conduct is exemplified in the memorials that Gu Yong 谷永 submitted during the reign of Han Chengdi 漢成帝 (r. 33–7 B.C.E.). The question may arise whether it became easier or more difficult to voice such criticism as the centuries passed.

The statement that “the desire for economic fairness underlay the introduction of the ‘equal field’ system in the late fifth century” (p. 144) may perhaps be questioned by those who see its introduction as a means of raising tax more effectively.

As in many other recent books the bibliography fails to give the uninformed reader the full details that he needs. Scholars of other empires may thus be led astray into thinking that the *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 was written in 1996 and the *Shiji* 史記 in 1997, or that Gu Yanwu’s work was first produced in 1994. The date for Rao Zongyi’s 饒宗頤 *Zhongguo shixue shang zhi zhengtong lun* 中國史學上之正統論 is given as 1996, when it was reprinted. The book was first published in 1977 (Hong Kong: Longmen shudian) and it is in the light of scholarship at that time that full justice can be given to Professor Rao’s work.

Page 153 includes a citation from a primary source. Note 45 on p. 204 directs a reader to find this in a secondary source, and this will serve the non-sinological reader admirably. An additional reference to the original source would serve the needs of Sinologist-historians.

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