

*Politics and Conservatism in Northern Song China: The Career and Thought of Sima Guang (A.D. 1019–1086)*. By Xiao-bin Ji. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005. Pp. xi + 253. \$42.00.

This book does two things that have not, I think, been done before in a Western language study of Song history. It is, first, a marvelous study of the dynamics of the relationship between the inner court and the outer court during a period when the inner court was often beset by such internal problems as choosing a successor and tensions between an empress dowager and the emperor and the outer court was increasingly divided by factions based on ideology. It is, second, a detailed case study of how three emperors (Renzong, Yingzong, and Shenzong) and one official (Sima Guang) were able to play politically important roles in the polity. I cannot improve on Ji's statement of the lesson of this study for historians: "The emperors (and sometimes the regents) never took their power for granted, but were instead always trying to strengthen and maintain this power. The ruler's work of asserting and maintaining control was a never-ending process." (p. 183) Some emperors were better at this than others, as Liu Jingzhen has shown in her study of the first three emperors.<sup>1</sup>

The Northern Song is an interesting period for examining the jockeying for power between the inner and outer court because the outer court was in the hands of literati officials who, during Sima Guang's lifetime, were increasingly guided by ideology. It was, as Wang Ruilai has called it, a time of *shidafu* government.<sup>2</sup> Sima is an interesting case because he generally was on the losing side of policy debates, having opposed both Yingzong's demand to call his biological father his father rather than his adoptive father the previous emperor and Shenzong's support for the New Policies. Why then was Sima kept at court for so long? Why did emperors such as Shenzong continue to cultivate him? Why did Empress Gao recall him from over a decade of retirement after Shenzong's death to lead an anti-New Policies coalition?

Ji Xiaobin answers these questions in two ways. First, Sima had a political philosophy that reduces to some basic precepts: good order in the world depends upon maintaining a hierarchical social and political order, hierarchy requires maintaining the supremacy of the emperor, and the duty of the emperor is to maintain the system he has inherited in good working order. Second, he shows how Sima positioned himself as a key player in the relationship not only between the inner and outer court but also within the inner court and among literati factions. Beginning with the adoption of Yingzong as Renzong's successor, Sima presented himself as the loyal defender of the emperor's interest (and worked to heal the breach between Yingzong and Empress Dowager Cao) at the same time he worked to bring down the Sate Council coalition led by Han Qi and

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<sup>1</sup> Liu Jingzhen 劉靜貞, *Beisong qianqi huangdi he tamen de quanli* 北宋前期皇帝和他們的權力 (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Wang Ruilai 王瑞來, *Sōdai no kōtei kenryoku to shidaiifu seiji* 宋代の皇帝權力と士大夫政治 (Tokyo: Kyuko shoin, 2001).

Ouyang Xiu. As Ji shows, divisions within the outer court served the interest of imperial power: keeping opponents of the leading ministers in high positions gave the emperor greater leverage over the chief councillors while giving the opposition the hope necessary to stay loyal. It seems that Sima was one of the figures the imperial house thought it could count on to defend the power of the emperor.

All this changed when Shenzong came to power. Although Shenzong clearly wanted to keep Sima at court as a useful counter to Wang Anshi and his successors, he was also committed to supporting the New Policies. This went too far for Sima and he refused to cooperate. For Ji the New Policies were very much Shenzong's doing, a result of his desire to build up the fiscal resources to expand the empire (something Sima opposed). It seems to me that Sima's determination to undo the New Policies *in toto* somewhat discomfits Ji, who sees Sima's behaviour as contradicting his conservative political philosophy which, in his view, ought to have led Sima to conserve past accomplishments and maintain stability (the very argument Sima had typically used against proponents of far-reaching institutional change).

We are thus faced with a paradox. If "Sima Guang believed in a hierarchical order in which the ruler held the ultimate power," (p. 49) then why did Sima refuse repeated imperial requests that he stay at court during the New Policies and, in alliance with Empress Dowager Gao, seek to abolish them when the emperor had died? One way of accounting for his behaviour would be to suppose that Sima's support for the throne was in fact a ploy. If Sima could persuade the ruler that he was the true defender of imperial power, undermine the ruling coalition under Yingzong, and at the same time put together a coalition of high officials out of power (by playing a key role in opposing Yingzong's view of the respect due his father), then Sima would be in position to lead a new coalition when the right moment came. The moment came when Shenzong took the throne and began to overhaul the outer court leadership (this was also a generational change, with the leading candidates being fifteen years younger than the previous group). Sima was a possibility but he was not chosen. His ties to the imperial house notwithstanding, the choice to adopt the New Policies was a rejection of Sima's political efforts and his sociopolitical philosophy. If we see Sima as being on his own ideological mission — to defend the existing social order by using the powers of government to thwart the social and economic changes taking place at the time — then we can see Sima's effort to abolish the New Policies in 1085–1086 as perfectly consistent with his aspirations from the 1040s on.

This is a plausible scenario but not one that Ji would entirely support, for the good reason that Sima the politician and Sima the political historian are consistent in emphasizing the importance of the throne to political stability. I suggest that this emphasis on the role of the emperor was a response to those who wanted to expand the scope of government so that it would play a greater role in transforming society, as the Fan Zhongyan coalition had once wanted to do and as Wang Anshi's group succeeded in doing. It is precisely the idea that the government should be put in service of an institutional programme for social and economic change, rather than working above all to preserve the dynasty by coping with the exigencies of the moment, that shifted control over policy making from the emperor to the chief councillor's coalition. Wang's

compromise with the emperor appears to have been to support and fund the emperor's imperialism in return for steadfast imperial support for a domestic policy programme; there is little to suggest that Wang had been an advocate of foreign wars prior to gaining power.

Clearly Sima was not an advocate of using government to further social transformation and economic growth. He did not have an activist programme although he believed that some things needed to be done to improve government operations and that getting the emperor to fulfil his proper function was crucial to this. But in what sense did Sima grant the emperor ultimate power? Ji rejects Anthony Sariti's argument that Sima was in fact limiting the role of the ruler to being an arbiter among officials whom Sima granted higher moral authority.<sup>3</sup> Yet if so what basis did Sima then have for refusing to support the emperor's policy decisions? How could Sima know what the interests of the dynasty really were and call the emperor to task? I wonder if we should not distinguish, perhaps in a way that Sima himself did not see as clearly as we might, between power and authority. Sima could argue that dynastic stability required that the emperor stay in power for he had to have the ability to change the leaders of the outer court. But it did not follow from this that the emperor had, by virtue of his power, sole authority over deciding what the government ought to do for the simple reason that emperors, like officials, could be wrong. Thus emperors, and officials, needed guidance from people who could explain why a policy decision was right or wrong. Sima behaved this way, he offered that guidance, but did he know that he was claiming authority to set the standards according to which emperors and officials should operate? Although Ji Xiao-bin does not devote a great deal of attention to the contents of Sima historiography there is enough here to suggest that Sima's authority stemmed in no small part from his possession of a more extensive, better documented, and more analytic understanding of political history than any of his contemporaries. Is it possible that the strengths and weaknesses of Sima's sociopolitical vision were a reflection of the strengths and weaknesses of his historiography?

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Sariti, "Monarchy, Bureaucracy and Absolutism in the Political Thought of Ssu Ma Kuang," *Journal of Asian Studies* 32.1 (1972), pp. 53–76. Sariti was in turn rejecting Xiao Gongquan's view of Sima as the spokesman for absolute loyalty to the ruler (and thus a supporter of autocracy).