EAST ASIA

YURI PINES:
The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy.
viii, 245 pp. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012.
£27.95. ISBN 978 0 691 13495 6.
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The aim of this book is to introduce to non-specialists one of the most intriguing questions in Chinese political culture: why did the Chinese empire survive for more than two-thousand years when all other ancient empires vanished from the scene? In order to attempt to answer this question, Yuri Pines assembles a formidable battery of information, drawn from a vast range of historical and philosophical texts, covering both the imperial era and crucially the age before the unification of China in 221 BCE. For a book about imperial China, it may perhaps be surprising that so much of the author's attention is focused on the pre-imperial era, but in order to understand subsequent historical developments, it is necessary to explain the ideological underpinnings of the empire which significantly predate the founding of the Qin dynasty. It is the author's contention, no doubt entirely correct, that if it were not for the apparently universal consensus, established long before the unification, that peace could only be achieved under the auspices of a single monarch (the Son of Heaven) the Chinese empire could not have become the long-lasting entity that it did. Furthermore, lacking any kind of break in the intellectual tradition of classical antiquity of the kind that would be imposed by a "Dark Age", Chinese scholars found the lessons of the past constantly at their sides. This being the case, any educated person would be aware of the appalling carnage of the pre-imperial era that had first forged the belief that unity is strength.

The core four chapters of *The Everlasting Empire* discuss the impact of the imperial ideal from the perspective of four key groups of people. The first is the monarchs, who found their theoretically almost limitless powers seriously cramped in practice by a series of measures designed to thwart all but the most dictatorial and/or competent of rulers. Here Pines' argument focuses particularly on the burden imposed by ritual obligations; officials seem to have found it convenient to load their emperors with a massively time-consuming ceremonial burden that would tax the most conscientious of rulers. This is followed by an analysis of the roles of the literati – recruited into the bureaucracy on the basis of merit and hence often intrinsically antagonistic to the position of the hereditary monarch, imposed regardless of ability – the local elite and the people. Of these sections, that on the local elites is by far the weakest, since it lacks the generally excellent choice of supporting information seen in other chapters. On the other hand the section on the populace is extremely successful; the author concentrates on the issue of rebellions, which was often the only means by which people were able to express their dissatisfaction with the government and in some cases even bring down the dynasty. This chapter provides an original and perceptive analysis of the ideology behind successive uprisings against the state.

Although not particularly clearly expressed, the author seems to have developed the idea of a kind of social contract between the monarch and the people, in an antagonistic relationship with officialdom. Bureaucrats administered the country on the part of the monarch, but in spite of all the rhetoric, they were often venal,

self-serving and short-sighted, or in league with the local elite to oppress the people. The interests of the emperor and the people were closely linked; the people needed a stable government which they believed only an emperor could provide, and the emperor was not interested in seeing any policy implemented that might threaten either the short or the long-term security of his dynasty. Even isolated inside his palace, the emperor could not afford to ignore the wishes of the people. The emperor may have benefitted from the idea that the imperial system was necessary, but his dynasty was far from inviolable. As the author notes, it was the incompetent emperors who did not respond effectively to signs of crisis among the people who were the most likely to face serious trouble. Discussions of this kind of social contract are perhaps skewed by the focus of this book on the more intelligent and effective emperors in China's history: Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, the founder of the Ming, and the three great High Qing emperors, Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong. Although admitting that the vast majority of emperors were far from being this competent, the way the gap between the actual and the ideal was bridged in the reigns of stupid, lazy or unhealthy rulers is a subject largely ignored.

Given the broad scope of this book, generalizations are necessary, but at times they risk misleading the reader. For example, in the argument found in the chapter on the role of the monarch, Yuri Pines suggests that the lack of effective leadership aggravated the crises "which should have been quite manageable" that brought down the Ming and Qing empires. This ignores the multifarious difficulties which faced both dynasties towards the end; the ecological disasters that occurred, particularly at the end of the Ming dynasty, were genuinely appalling and no state, modern or pre-modern, would have found them easy to deal with. It is also unfortunate in a book aimed at the general reader that the translations given are by-and-large somewhat awkward and difficult to follow; this may serve to blunt the pleasure of reading what is otherwise an excellent account of the ideological underpinnings of the Chinese empire.

Olivia Milburn
Seoul National University

LI FENG and DAVID PRAGER BRANNER (eds):
Writing and Literacy in Early China: Studies from the Columbia Early China Seminar.
viii, 494 pp. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2011.
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Since the early twentieth century, the growing avalanche of excavated inscriptions and manuscripts from ancient China has opened up unprecedented opportunities for research on political, social, religious and cultural history through previously inaccessible primary sources. This edited volume offers contributions by leading palaeographers and scholars of ancient China who utilize a wide range of archaeologically retrieved evidence to elucidate the origins, early development and structure of the Chinese script, but also discuss material aspects, practical uses, and social contexts of writing up to the second century CE.

Proceeding from the discussion of a recently discovered late neolithic solar observatory, David Pankenier builds a compelling argument for the impulse to develop