Honor and Shame in Early China

By Mark Edward Lewis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 264 pp. £29.99 (cloth).

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This book explores a relatively understudied topic in early China: that of honor (Lewis' word) and glory (my word) and the reverse, shame and humiliation. The blurb writers quoted on the back cover seem to think the chief value of the book is that it puts to rest the old honor–shame binary first posited by anthropologists, but Lewis, as a good historian, would not mistake a model for a reality. No, the book interests us for other reasons, as it invites us to consider human motivation, and the book fails, where it fails, on other analytical grounds.

If I understand his argument correctly, Lewis contends that the notions of honor and shame applied to or were embraced by different populations over the many centuries he catalogues, roughly from two centuries before Confucius until the immediate post-Han period. Tensions between and within each group (especially when there's collective decision-making, p. 27), like Marxian thesis and antithesis, somehow drove further developments, allowing new sources of prestige to proliferate. Given the scope of his survey, Lewis necessarily employs broad generalizations as well as in-depth analysis, close reading, and contextualization. The main thread weaving each chapter into the others is his identification of a precise group who have embraced these notions of honor: for example, Lewis thinks the notions of honor and dishonor were the preserve of the warrior aristocracy around the time of Confucius, and by Eastern Han, more or less the same notions came to be upheld by the common people as well. (By comparison, Mark Elvin speaks of this happening in Ming, over a millennium later, with print culture.) Although he accepts that "the emergence of new groups … to political influence was often marked by the emergence of a new code of honor" (3), readers are sometimes left to fill in the blanks with respect to the precise content of these new codes of honor. Does Lewis really want us to concur with his formulation that the "larger and more abstract the entity to which they were committed" (with Lewis speaking of Pericles and "world empire"), the more the appeal to "honor" became central (5)? This strikes me as both a large and a dubious claim. Personal loyalty to a single patron could certainly provoke an intense preoccupation with honor, as when Sima Qian describes his own castration, and families were involved too, as with Yu Rang's sister. Missing from the narrative seems to be the recognition that ideas float and morph, then recombine in downright peculiar ways but perhaps never go away.

Historians tend to be preoccupied with tracking changes over time, perhaps unduly so, if Paul Veyne, Carla Nappi, and I, among others, are right to think the chief work of history is less assigning notches on timelines (an early modern invention anyway) than making its actors' dilemmas come alive to later generations who may find themselves experiencing similar issues. And given how very small the ratio is of texts that have survived from the early empires, statistics based on the surviving materials cannot possibly

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tell us much about change over time (cf. Jean-Pierre Drège's *Les Bibliotheques*) anyway. Many incredibly satisfying emplotments appear in hindsight to have been built on thin air. But having been trained to tell a chronological story, that is what most historians usually serve up. Still, it's an odd chronological history that Lewis tells, since Lewis presumes a fairly constant meaning for his key terms "honor" and "shame,"—so much so that he draws upon early modern and modern writings (many in anthropology) to explain the terms, as often as he cites the writings from Early China. Odd, too, when the chronological boils down to the "emergence and evolution of groups fundamental to altering the social and political order" (13). (The Qin and Han groups don't always look so entirely "new" to me, given how many elite families traced their ancestry back to the pre-Qin kingdoms and benefitted from the *ren* privilege to hand down offices.) Despite the paucity of evidence before 300 BCE, Lewis confidently identifies the "earliest example in China" of group members claiming honor outside of their ascribed status, on the basis of "their devotion to study and cultivating virtue" (14); no matter that "study" often means emulation. Later on, others won honor for their group's propensity to use violence or for their standing within what Lewis calls the "bureaucratic hierarchy" (14). (Perhaps I quibble, but Weber's term "bureaucracy" strikes me as far too rationalizing.) And finally, during Qin and Han, groups won honor for their "intellectual expertise" (14), and later still, as local magnates (16) exhibiting a new style of "elite filial piety" (176). There are even one or two gardeners and shepherds wandering around (as on p. 206), who adopt these notions of honor, as epitomes of the "lowliest people," presumably "non-state actors" (185; cf. 105). (With these, I think Lewis misconstrues the sources, which emphasize the need for those in power to consult widely, rather than positing a new group that has gained a sense of honor.) Meanwhile Lewis adduces surprisingly little evidence beyond the well-trodden ground (e.g., *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Zuozhuan*, *Mozi*); aside from Shuihudi or Zhangjiashan, few excavated texts appear in these pages, and relatively few testimonies from the standard histories and Han masterworks. The Chunqiu period is mostly told from the *Zuozhuan*, for example, when bronze inscriptions abound.

I agree with Lewis that tensions—defining honor both by hereditary rank and by heroism in battle is one example Lewis repeatedly returns to—are embedded in the very notions of "honor" and "shame," partly because these terms refer both to societal approbation and an inner sense of worth, somewhat as the adjective "elite" does today. But I would have thought it likely or even proven that the connotations of "honor" and "shame" not only migrated over time, but also inevitably changed, just as the allied notions of trust and ritual propriety and institutions changed, even within the same groups. For always a claim to honor was to stake a claim to greater moral authority and, sometimes, at least to suspicious minds, to seize greater power. Ergo, the endless debates over whom and how much to honor. How semantic and systemic change occurs in Lewis's scheme I cannot tell, yet I worry about Lewis's characterization of some groups he names as "political entrepreneurs" who "served as middlemen between the state and local society" (185; cf. p. 220.). His writing seems too focused on public vs. private (as with pp. 150–55, 169–77); too individualistic (see his chapter 1, also p. 150) and too gendered ("such honor was entirely masculine" … " manliness"), considering that honor attached as much to families and clans as to individual males and long-term vs. short-term calculations about honor were made quite regularly (110). Furthermore, if notions of the "barbarian" changed (as Li Wai-yee and Yang Shao-yun allege), then the rationales for fighting honorably against the uncivilized must have changed as well. In a forthcoming essay, I propose eleven logically separate

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but cross-cutting sources of authority that conferred honor upon people during the early empires. By contrast, Lewis for one period finds honor in seniority, as on page 17, or in state service ("the *only* avenue for advancement," on p. 100, emphasis added).

The crucial point for me is this: every text and sometimes even successive passages within a single text add specific coloration to the terms, sometimes going so far as to attach a new and highly subversive definition to the standard virtue words, twisting them out of all recognition. The complexities are well-illustrated in the story of Xiao He, able chancellor for the Western Han founder, who worked very hard to appear corrupt, lest an excessively sterling reputation jeopardize his good fortune and well-earned standing. His goal was hardly to claim singular (i.e., exceptional) glory, which might threaten to dim the light of his liege. The complexities equally arise whenever one considers the multiple foils for the Ru (engaged in equally honorable tasks), or compares the three "Rulin zhuan" devoted to the classicists.

Lewis's contrasting vision of a much more unified discourse justifies his approach in the Introduction, which surveys multiple modern theories about honor and shame, including how bourgeois dignity supposedly led to modern economic growth, while making barely any attempt to tie any of these to the specific theories or practices of early China. But, crucially, for any chronological narrative to work, one has to believe that the sources that are used actually date to the periods for which hypotheses were devised. So why does Lewis not bother to tell us, even in a footnote or an Appendix, why he dates the *Zuozhuan* and the *Analects* the way he does (ignoring William Hung for the former text and Makeham, et al. for the latter)? (Today's *Zuozhuan* must differ significantly from the Han-era *Zuoshi chunqiu,* since we are told this by Du Yu, the very man who rearranged and reedited the text. And why does Lewis presume that the Han-era *Record of Rituals* accurately describes Western Zhou values (34)? *Shangshu dazhuan* is assumed to date to the Qin–Han transition, despite careful studies suggesting Zheng Xuan (d. 200) inserted new ideas into the text (101), and these are just samples. Certainly, it cannot be because Lewis is averse to a lengthy excursus, as in his note 25 on page 135.

So *for me* this book feels overly schematic and unpersuasive. Occasionally I find it hard to follow the argumentative threads, let alone use the book to de-construct a unitary China as object of analysis. The empire moves mostly *en bloc* here, even before 221 BCE. The generalizations are too sweeping, as when literary composition can only figure "either as substitute for a failed public career" or as "entertainment that turned its author into a jester" (216), or when Lewis suggests that it is wealth *per se* that's the problem (e.g., pp. 55, 145), rather than *how* you pursue wealth and *what* you do with it that counts, as the enduring popularity of tales about Fan Li 范蠡 suggests. The bibliography is quirky, with long swaths out of date and some misattributions (as with Naomi Richard). Highly rhetoricized court polemics and didactic texts become transparent windows onto the realities on the ground. Status terms remain ill-defined, as when Mencius speaks of the honorable "people" (*min*), which group Lewis dubs "universal" and "extended to the entire social order" (82), only two pages later to speak of the elevation of "mental labor" (my "administrative service") above backbreaking farming. (Since *min* can sometimes refer to the high-ranking, as several Japanese scholars and Thomas Crone have noted, the term is tricky, admittedly.) Prominent figures and whole groups are mischaracterized: Liu Xiang was no "foe" of military ideals (contra p. 95n5); in fact, he famously argued that the court should pardon two adventurers who disobeyed the ruler's express orders, on the grounds that their resort to weapons had been spectacularly successful.

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I have read and reread many of Lewis's works with great profit, my personal favorite being his book on space. In one of Lewis's anecdotes (this time from the *Mencius*), a court official protests that he alone respects his ruler since he alone offers criticism, while others do not trouble to do so. I share that official's sentiments, when I say this book does not do what the book on space does: offer a survey of the perspectives of the historical actors themselves. To my mind, an ideal work devoted to honor and shame would map the contours of the shifting terrain of the vocabulary of "honor and shame" and the precise contexts in which new versions of these concepts erupt, sometimes within the same group of "intellectuals" or local magnates. I want to familiarize readers with a broader range of motivations and immediate situations that propelled people, high and low, to take action.

The potential appeal of this book is nonetheless very wide—interested readers outside of the academy and undergraduates, as well as professional historians—and I suspect that different readers will happily take away different lessons. General readers outside the academy may find that its arguments resonate with what they have learned elsewhere, while offering a new lens through which to view the issues of honor and shame that introduces them to some classics of Chinese thought in the process. Undergraduates will learn from Lewis that the emotions are a fit topic for historical exploration, also that groups do not command stable power, even in remote antiquity, and many of the translations gathered within its pages are good to "think with." His decision to trace the emergence of later "formal legal systems" to the honor-shame discourse is surely important, unless we should reverse cause-and-effect. (That the laws, ascriptive as well as descriptive, always reflect the norms of the powerful seems vital to register.) These are not paltry gifts to those of us who labor in "Area Studies," and I am grateful. The framing is all.

An Urban History of China

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Textbooks are hard to review. The natural audience is students, rather than scholars, and I am blessedly no longer a student. Textbooks work or fail to work in the context of the varied mysteries of classroom practice. Some instructors desire encyclopedic comprehensiveness; some seek inspiring prose. I have known teachers to anchor every beat of the class in the textbook's unfolding exercises, and I have endured courses in which the wizened professor recited from his self-authored text. Even trickier is imagining how students will respond to a textbook. Do they take copious notes on each chapter? Do they expect review questions? Are they coming to the material with

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