

## REVIEW

Charles Sanft. *Communication and Cooperation in Early Imperial China*. Albany: State University Press of New York, 2014.

Reviewed by  
Karen Turner\*

Charles Sanft's study of the relation between communication networks and political power in the Qin empire represents a welcome direction in early Chinese studies. Sanft gleans information from a wide range of sources to offer a measured revisionist interpretation of China's first empire, places these materials in an interesting theoretical context, and presents his findings in a readable fashion. This book will be of interest to specialists in any area of Chinese studies, but also accessible to a wider audience. While I believe that some of his arguments are stronger than others, his study opens up new ways to judge the indexes of power in any early empire. Historians have long understood that the anti-Qin propaganda that legitimated the Han order needs to be read with skepticism. Yet, as Sanft notes in his conclusion, the Qin regime has served as such a useful example of unmitigated despotism that it is no easy task to demonstrate that cooperation and communication rather than coercion alone drove the architects of empire.

After reading the book, I found the concluding chapter important for placing the book in the context of modern theoretical constructions and anti-Qin historiography. Sanft cautiously reminds readers that he is not rejecting the negative example of Qin despotism but rather offering a new way of thinking about the ways in which the Qin state builders managed to create a system that brought the apparatus of government in touch with the wider population.

Among the interdisciplinary works he draws from, Michael Suk-Young Chwe's study of ritual culture provides a most interesting insight. Chwe makes the point that polities rise and fall in part according to how effectively they are able to spread "common knowledge" that encourages obedience. If individuals or discrete groups become aware that others with similar interests accept a higher power, they are more likely to fall in line. Sanft quotes Chwe's observation that,

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“Submitting to a social or political authority is a coordination problem,” according to Chwe. (p. 22)

Communication is the key to spreading common knowledge and the book’s most compelling examples show that text-based information provides but one means to this end. The middle chapters demonstrate how public rituals, roads, steles, carvings, written laws, walls, and imperial tours brought ordinary citizens in contact with imperial elites and institutions. Roads, for example, not only served economic and military needs but also displayed the power of the state to garner resources beyond local means to build them. Even if and perhaps because commoners were prohibited from using roads designed for imperial progresses, their presence alone inspired awe. Sanft’s contention that the Qin empire reached a wide range of territory and populations would not be viable without information derived from excavated materials dating from the late Warring States through the first century of Han rule. For example, Sanft draws on archaeological studies to trace the route of the famous *zhi dao*, 直道 (Direct Road), which linked the area around the capital to the northwest border region. This important route was laid out to transport goods and military personnel but also designed to cross important contested areas as a signifier of imperial power.

Sanft’s argument that the Qin system of household registration provided a mechanism for communicating with local populations makes sense. Lawmakers realized that the laws had to be widely known if they served to deter violence. The regulations governing denunciations in the Shuihudi codes indicate that informants had to be keenly aware of the ins and outs of the rules to benefit from snitching. We know too from Qin and Han materials that a high value was placed on clarity, consistency, and public knowledge of the laws. Such predictability must have seemed preferable to lawlessness for many individuals at all levels of society. But the intent of strict rules for regulating households and punishing criminals must be considered, for they aimed not to protect subjects from whimsical decisions but rather to control officials in charge of harvesting human and material resources with a minimum influx of state wealth. Humans were measured and fed according to strict rules based on their potential to provide labor in support of the state’s institutions and elites. As Peter Bang has written in a comparative study of Rome and early China, “By imposing tribute, empires forced resources out of the semi-closed cells of local economies and brought them into a wider sphere of circulation.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. See “Commanding and Consuming the World: Empire, Tribute and Trade in Roman and Chinese History,” in *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on World Empires*, ed. Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 100–120.

I agree with Sanft that Chinese writers who observed the birth of the first centralized state were well aware of the implications of empire. Xunzi, for example, offers insights worthy of any modern political theorist, arguing that the state is the most powerful instrument for benefiting the world and the ruler of men is in the most influential position with the authority to offer these benefits. But, he cautions, the state also bears the heaviest burden because it cannot be maintained if it failed to accumulate resources. Yes, we do see a kind of populism in Chinese thought that is unique among early empires, but it is also important to remember which groups gained status and luxury goods from the riches of empire.

Sanft's contention that theoretical frameworks derived from outside the Chinese case can highlight important patterns and differences among polities is valuable. All too often, Chinese exceptionalism has stunted innovative thinking in our field. In this light, I think that more information could be gained from Sanft's data, especially in his chapter on progress and publicity. Of Qin Shihuang's peripatetic kingship, he writes, "My analysis indicates that through the repeated performance of the ritual progress, the First Emperor created common knowledge of himself and the existence of a new empire and ruler, common knowledge that could be expected to spread through interpersonal networks into places not visited." (p. 89) Studies of itinerant kingship in other societies indicate that a moving court played similar roles. For continental medieval Europe, for example, Catherine Clarke observes: "Rather than the highly-developed literate systems of administration used in Anglo-Saxon England, Ottonian rulers relied more heavily on the use of non-verbal communication and demonstrative behavior, enacting their power visually within the public sphere and relying on complex networks of personal relationships and loyalty."<sup>2</sup> Other studies of European kingship point out that monarchs took risks when leaving the capital, for prolonged absences offered opportunities for treachery, but were necessary for hearing legal cases and collecting taxes. It does seem that in contrast with European kings, China's First Emperor traveled less to implement government than to display power. Nonetheless, comparative insights about the actual mechanisms used by monarchs on the move who used visual codes to signify power would be useful for uncovering what was truly unique about early Chinese programs. As S. N. Eisenstadt has demonstrated in his survey of traditional bureaucratic empires, these polities shared common

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2. In *Writing Power in Anglo-Saxon England: Texts, Hierarchies, Economies* (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 82. See Clarke for further readings on Medieval European travelling monarchs.

problems of governance but brought particular cultural traditions to resolve them.<sup>3</sup>

In "Manhunt as Medium," an intriguing analysis of the search for Zhang Liang after his attempt to assassinate the First Emperor, Sanft raises interesting questions. Sanft views the empire-wide manhunt as motivated by more than a need to capture a potential killer: "As in other cases, those who were looking were also seen: a broad search could generate knowledge of the new monarch and make his universal reach known." (pp. 94–95) But this case of a criminal on the run also serves as but one of the many examples in which subjects chose to flee the state rather than serve it. The Qin and Han excavated legal materials contain a good number of regulations and examples about handling absconders. Ironically, the Han founder, Liu Bang, knew the Qin laws well enough when he served as a low-level functionary to decide to begin a rebellion rather than submit to punishment for a tardy arrival with his charges to work on the Emperor's mausoleum at Mount Li. Thus, a knowledge of the laws of the state and understanding the consequences of breaking them did not always lead to submission. One of many questions I am left with after reading this provocative book is this: why do some people decide to serve rather than resist the impositions of the state? What bargains do elites need to make with those whose labor supports their lifestyles and positions? That this splendid book offers opportunities to ask new questions of a well-studied period in Chinese history attests to its value. I have appreciated Charles Sanft's articles on early China and this book is, I hope, a prelude to further interesting work.

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3. *The Political Systems of Empires* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).