

*Forming the Early Chinese Court: Rituals, Spaces, Roles.* By LUKE HABBERSTAD. Seattle: UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS, 2016. Pp. xii + 240. \$90 (cloth); \$30 (paper).

Luke Habberstad starts his book with the promise to clarify “an important change in normative understandings of imperial order,” which “occurred at some point during and after Western Han” (206/202 BCE–9 CE). “While people in later eras imagined government as a hierarchical collection of defined offices slotted into categories, early imperial subjects saw not categories but relationships, which were centered around the imperial court and regulated by rewards and punishments. How and when did this change occur?” (p. 9).

This is a most promising start. That the imperial Chinese political system evolved over centuries, and that its perceptions among the elite and populace at large changed too, are well known; but how and why this process occurred, especially in early imperial history, are still not sufficiently understood. Habberstad proposes a partial answer to this question in chapter five, “The Literary Invention of Bureaucracy.” There he traces the changing mode of presenting officials’ careers in their *Shiji* 史記 and *Hanshu* 漢書 biographies in the tables from these texts that summarize the Han-era occupants of high offices, and in late Western Han poems called “Admonitions of the Many Offices” (*Baiguan zhen* 百官箴). The results are revealing. Whereas early presentations of officials focused on contingencies that shaped their careers, late Western Han offices are presented as “more clearly defined autonomous institutions” (p. 144), functioning according to “well-established and historically constant principles” (p. 166). This analysis, based as it is on an extraordinarily sensitive reading of texts that had been largely neglected by scholars of Han history, is the most interesting and valuable part of the entire book.

Four other chapters cover topics that are only loosely related to either the transformation of Han officialdom or the “formation of the early Chinese court” (the book’s title). The first chapter depicts debates about sumptuary regulations that were supposed to govern conspicuous consumption by Han aristocrats and officials. It also analyzes the attempts of the Han court to correlate different coexisting hierarchical systems, such as the system of ranks of merit (*jue* 爵) and official salary (*zhi* 祿). The second chapter revolves around the famous New Year’s audience of 51 BCE, which was attended by Huhanye 呼韓邪 (d. 31 BCE), the first Xiongnu 匈奴 leader to acquiesce to the demands of Han superiority, and whose unprecedented court visit caused heated debates among Han courtiers regarding the appropriate rituals. In the third chapter, the discussion shifts to the spatial dimension of the Han courts, including debates over the emperor’s parks and the formation of “forbidden zones” within the palace precincts, aimed at further secluding the emperor from his subjects. The fourth chapter discusses the reforms of officialdom initiated in 8 BCE, the penultimate year of Emperor Cheng’s 漢成帝 (r. 33–7 BCE) reign. Some of these chapters contain highly insightful analyses: in particular, Habberstad’s discussion of the subtleties of *Hanshu*’s accounts about Huhanye’s visit is fascinating. However, it is very difficult to read these chapters as an organic whole. Most of them could have appeared as stand-alone essays.

Habberstad is clearly aware of the difficulty of integrating his chapters into a coherent narrative. In the introduction to the monograph, he hints that this difficulty reflects an intrinsic ambiguity of the term “court,” which can refer to a specific space or a set of institutions, or just serve as a rhetorical category. This is a fair point, and Habberstad is surely justified in displaying caution when dealing with this topic. However, his choice of focusing on representation and rhetoric at the expense of historical analysis comes at a price. His in-depth discussions of specific case-studies—the trees—prevent the reader from seeing the forest, namely, the rise of the court as the focal point of political life at the beginning of the imperial era.

To understand this change, consider the political texts from the preceding Warring States period (Zhanguo 戰國, 453–221 BCE). To be sure, they do mention the importance of the ruler’s entourage, his relatives, and favorites, and their impact on political life. Some texts—most notably *Han Feizi* 韓非子—warn of the potentially disruptive influence of the ruler’s bedfellows, close kinsmen, entertainers, and trusted aides on the government’s functioning.<sup>1</sup> Yet the general impression conveyed by

1. *Han Feizi jijie* 韓非子集解, annot. Wang Xianshen 王先慎 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), II.9.53–58 (“Ba jian” 八姦).

Warring States texts is that real decisions were made not in the ruler's inner quarters but elsewhere: by generals on the battlefield, by local governors in outlying territories, and, of course, by high ministers, whose power allegedly reflected their individual skills rather than their proximity to the rulers. There are, of course, exceptions. For instance, we know of the undue power held by Queen Dowager Xuan of Qin 秦宣太后 (d. 265 BCE). But the Queen Dowager's excessive authority is not presented as a mere aberration: in fact, the topic is introduced primarily to illustrate how easily a clever guest minister could curb her power.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, we know of scheming ministers and malevolent usurpers, but we are told that their success was invariably due to their independent power base outside the court, rather than their position as court insiders.<sup>3</sup>

This picture changes dramatically once we enter the imperial era. Think of the malevolent plotter Zhao Gao 趙高 (d. 207 BCE), who effectively toppled the first imperial dynasty, Qin 秦 (221–207 BCE), in the aftermath of the First Emperor's death in 210 BCE. Zhao Gao's success derived from his custodianship of the official seals at the moment of the First Emperor's death as well as from his intimate relations with the would-be Second Emperor, Huhai 胡亥 (*Shiji* 6.264). Or think of Empress Lü 呂后 (d. 180 BCE), who almost hijacked the Han dynasty away from the Liu lineage following the death of her husband, Liu Bang 劉邦 (d. 195 BCE). Or think of Huo Guang 霍光 (d. 68 BCE), who "spent his entire career in the inner court, managing the daily life of the emperor,"<sup>4</sup> and then rose to a position of utmost eminence. Such careers are unheard of in the Warring States. How should we understand the difference? Does it merely reflect the prominence of the court and its internal affairs in imperial Chinese historiography, or is it a real byproduct of the elevation of the emperors to a superhuman position, in the course of which proximity to the emperor's person and insignia mattered much more than before? That Habberstad did not engage this question in a monograph titled *Forming the Early Chinese Court* is regrettable. At the very least, I believe he should have addressed the impact of the above cases on the changing views of the imperial court under the Han.

This lack of historical sensitivity weakens several other of Habberstad's discussions. For instance, chapter one, which focuses on sumptuary regulations, often creates the impression that a preoccupation with these regulations and with ritual manifestations of social hierarchy is a distinctive Han phenomenon. This is patently wrong, of course: this topic was at the heart of aristocratic society of the late Bronze Age (ca. 900–400 BCE), as is amply reflected both archeologically and textually. Ignoring this rich background, and especially the ideology of ritual as represented in the *Gongyang Commentary* on the *Springs-and-Autumns Annals* 春秋公羊傳, the most influential canonical text through much of the Former Han, impoverishes Habberstad's discussion.<sup>5</sup> Or take, for instance, chapter two with its in-depth analysis of the debates about appropriate rituals for the visiting Xiongnu leader. Habberstad could have improved his analysis by considering that the Zhou rituals discussed by Emperor Xuan's 漢宣帝 (r. 74–48 BCE) courtiers simply could not have included anything relevant to the Xiongnu's status of a "rival state" 敵國. A better knowledge of Zhou rituals and their presentation in Warring States and

2. This is the story of the Qin guest minister Fan Sui 范雎 (d. 255 BCE), who allegedly helped King Zhaoxiang 秦昭襄王 (r. 306–251 BCE) to curtail the excessive power of the Queen Dowager. See *Zhanguo ce zhushi* 戰國策注釋, annot. He Jianzhang 何建章 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), 5.9.170–72 and 5.10.181 ("Qin ce" 秦策 3); *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997) 79.2408–12; tr. Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian: Qin Dynasty* (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. of Hong Kong, 1993), 138–42.

3. The stories of these usurpers are particularly favored in *Han Feizi*. Notably, the majority of usurpers depicted there come from the preceding Springs-and-Autumns period (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 BCE) rather than from Han Fei's 韓非 (d. 233 BCE) own age.

4. Cited from Liang Cai, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2014), 136. Habberstad does not refer to this study, which is surely relevant to his topic.

5. For the archeological manifestation of sumptuary gradations in the Bronze Age period, see the groundbreaking study by Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1050–250 BC): The Archeological Evidence* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA, 2006); for textual debates about ritual, see Yuri Pines, "Disputers of the *Li*: Breakthroughs in the Concept of Ritual in Preimperial China," *Asia Major* (Third Series) 13.1 (2000): 1–41; for the *Gongyang zhuan*, its ideology, and its impact, see the seminal study by Joachim Gentz, *Das Gongyang zhuan: Auslegung und Kanonisierung der Frühlings- und Herbstannalen (Chunqiu)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001).

early Han literature is, in my eyes, essential for an adequate treatment of ritual debates and practices throughout the Han dynasty.

My last critical comment is directed not to the author but to the publisher. I cannot understand the decision to omit Chinese characters from the main text and relegate them to the glossary (which, alas, contains just a fraction of numerous *pinyin* transliterations scattered throughout the book). This might have made sense for a book targeted at a non-Sinological readership. Yet clearly the book, which jumps into the depths of Han political life with only minimal introduction of background information, is intended for specialists, for whom the absence of Chinese characters is a real minus, especially in view of the inexplicable exclusion of personal names from the glossary. Today, Chinese characters should be included in any study of Chinese history and culture as a matter of course.

My critical comments notwithstanding, Habberstad should be congratulated for his book. Scholars of early Han history will surely benefit from his manifold astute observations. I hope that the author will be encouraged to expand his treatment of the fascinating topic of the history and image of China's early imperial court.

YURI PINES

NANKAI UNIVERSITY AND THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

---

*Women in Ancient China*. By BRET HINSCH. Lanham, MD: ROWMAN AND LITTLEFIELD, 2018. Pp. xiv + 209. \$79.

*Women in Early Medieval China*. By BRET HINSCH. Lanham, MD: ROWMAN AND LITTLEFIELD, 2019. Pp. xx + 211. \$85.

In recent years, a number of scholars have produced significant studies of the role of women over the course of Chinese history. By far the most comprehensive in terms of coverage and scope is the ten-volume series *Zhongguo funü tongshi* 中國婦女通史 (History of Women in China; 2010), but there have also been important English-language monographs that attempt a *longue durée* analysis, such as Keith McMahon's study of empresses and palace women, *Women Shall Not Rule: Imperial Wives and Concubines from Han to Liao* (2013), as well as his *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines from Song to Qing* (2016). With *Women in Ancient China*, a companion and prequel to his earlier study, *Women in Early Imperial China* (2002), Bret Hinsch undertakes the almost impossible task of summarizing for the general reader what is known about the condition of Chinese women from Neolithic times to the unification of China in 221 BCE.

*Women in Ancient China* opens with an account of the problems caused in Chinese academic circles by the state-supported doctrine that there was a "matriarchal" phase in the development of Chinese society, thus providing a useful introduction to the development of this theory and its ongoing influence. This is followed by four chapters describing the role of women in Neolithic societies, and in the Shang (ca. 1600–1046 BCE), the Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE), and the Eastern Zhou (771–221 BCE) dynasties. Covering such a vast period of time and such a huge geographical area in a couple of hundred pages poses exceptional challenges, some of which the author has explicitly recognized, and others that are not mentioned. One term, which it might be thought crucial to define, is "China." This volume deals with women in ancient China before China existed, and although the cultures in which they lived certainly existed geographically within the borders of what is now the People's Republic of China, that does not necessarily mean that they made any cultural contribution to later civilizations in the same region. This issue is raised by the author in one paragraph in the introduction, but that really does not go far enough. To take but one example, Liangzhu Culture (here dated to 3400–2500 BCE) represents a highly sophisticated civilization whose jade artworks have long been appreciated, but whose astonishing architectural achievements are only recently starting to be understood. The key sites associated with this culture, in and around Liangzhu in Zhejiang province, were eventually abandoned due to rising sea levels, which rendered the whole area uninhabit-