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Review: Literate Community in Early Imperial China: The Northwestern Frontier in Han Times, by Charles Sanft

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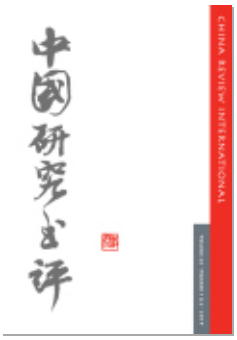

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alcohol live, not least to survive the cold winters. Sandhaus mentions going to Harbin but unfortunately does not describe his experiences there. Also of interest would be more discussion of the stresses of post–Cultural Revolution life. Families, friends, and comrades endured humiliations and life experiences that cannot just disappear amid the shifting of political tides. Those stresses no doubt contributed to *ganbei* culture and efforts to overcome the unimaginable traumas that the Communist Party instigated.

Drunk in China is a must-read for those interested in Chinese culture, history, and contemporary life. The title *Drunk in China* is somewhat of a misnomer, as the book delves deeply into history, literature, economics, and human lives across many centuries. On a personal level, Sandhaus makes it very clear that his research involved consumption of *baijiu*—in its many forms, in many varied locations, and many, many times. His is a very serious commitment to his craft, to be sure. The importance of this book is underlined by Sandhaus' borrowing of an analogy of the redoubtable historian Sima Guang (1019–1086), who posited that history is a mirror. Sandhaus argues: "As much as alcohol is a lens, it is also a mirror" (p. 260). Sandhaus expertly manipulates both lens and mirror to create fascinating kaleidoscopic images of the world's oldest drinking culture.

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Charles Sanft. *Literate Community in Early Imperial China: The Northwestern Frontier in Han Times*. Albany: State University of New York, 2019. xxiii, 252 pp. Hardcover $90.00, ISBN 978-1-4384-7513-4. 252 pages.

As implied in the title of his book, *Literate Community in Early Imperial China: The Northwestern Frontier in Han Times*, Charles Sanft undertakes his tasks on four aspects—literacy, community, early Han era (time frame), and the northwestern frontier (location)—by using the archaeological discoveries in the area located within modern Gansu Province and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in recent decades. Through his case study on the excavated written texts in various forms (e.g., edits and private letters) and on a variety of

materials (e.g., silk, paper, wood, and bamboo strips), the author argues that in the northwestern frontier—a border region being "far removed from the centers of culture and politics" (p. xv)—during the Han times, men and women at the lower social level were in fact meaningfully interacting with text. Furthermore, Sanft also argues that all these non-elite people (i.e., local residents and soldiers as well as their families from other regions) worked as a "community," rather than as individuals, when they encountered an opportunity to engage with texts.

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, this book consists of eight chapters that can be summarized as follows: The first two chapters elaborate on the major theme—that is, the not-elite people's interaction with the texts that occurred not in the central power-holder location. While chapter 1 expounds on the meanings of "literacy and community," chapter 2 explains the significance of given time period and location studied. For the remaining six chapters that follow, the author provides his close examination and interpretation to a variety of excavated texts—namely, posted texts; statements of individuals and groups; composite texts; practical texts; cultural texts; and private letters—and in each chapter, he focuses on one kind of text and offers his interpretation and analyses.

In chapter 1 titled "Interacting with Text in Early Imperial China and Beyond," the author sets up a framework for his case study on the border region and elaborates on the reasons behind his approach. In this chapter, he also notes that he wants to reconsider and redefine the word "literacy" when it is used in a distant past in China. He says, "This chapter makes the case for considering reading, including reading aloud; listening to others read aloud; writing; and dictation as different ways of doing one thing: interacting with text" (p. 1). That said, he redefines and broadens the meaning of "literacy" in this book. He remarks, by referring to Nicholas Orme's statement, that our common (and narrow) understanding of literacy as an individual's ability to both read and write is "because we live in a society that places an emphasis on people as individuals" (p. 21). He argues that when the concept of "literacy" is applied to the distant past, we need to think from a more collective perspective. He further emphasizes that "thinking in terms of community rather than individuals also provides a way to work around the intractable questions connected with determining rates of literacy" (p. 22). A "literate community" thus denotes how a group of people, being in "physical closeness," interacts with texts (p. 23).

In chapter 2, the author offers the intellectual and historical "contexts and sources" for his case study in which he focuses on the excavated documents from the four commandaries—Zhangye 张掖, Dunhuang 敦煌, Wuwei 武威, and Jiuquan 酒泉—four newly established Han commandaries 郡 in the northwestern border region. The function of this chapter, as he notes, is to give the reader a background in Han military presence in this area and an overview

of how the documents produced and transmitted among people (and how people interacted with them)—all the information necessary to understand his approach to the main chapters (3–8) in the book, which will be briefly discussed later.

The author begins his close examination of sets of excavated texts in chapter 3, titled "Posted Texts." The posted texts refer to various kinds of the written texts—rules for guards at border, written standards for signals, and imperial edicts—which were received from a distance or the power and cultural center. Because the information in these texts directly involved soldier's daily tasks and life of people at the lower social class, it was accessed and disseminated by both oral/aural and visual means—reading aloud; listening to others read aloud; or reading along (p. 63).

While chapter 3 studies the "received texts" that people in the northwestern region consume, the primary focus of chapter 4 is about the statements "created on the basis of speech," which in essence is "a kind of dictation" (p. 63). Of the texts created via dictation by the three groups of people—commoners or lower-rank military personnel; women; and non-Chinese people—the latter two are particularly noteworthy for their uncommon appearance in many Han bureaucratic documents that also "help illuminate the edges of the literate community" (p. 65). Furthermore, these recorded documents often contain the phrase "to state/say oneself" 自言," which marks a unique feature and functions as a label to indicate the words that follow are directly quoted from the person who spoke. A recorder—most likely a local government official—uses it to mark "the entrance of an assertion into the written record without judging its accuracy, merely attributing it to someone as an utterance and giving it a specific legal status as such" (p. 66).

In the "Women Interacting with Text" section, the author remarks that the body of texts told by non-elite women—either noted as such or indicating the given person was a wife of some man—is presented the same way as those by men (p. 69). The recorded documents of women demonstrate these lower social level women's equal participation in the literate community through their creation of text via dictation. This kind of interaction with texts also "contrasts with the near absence of records of non-elite women in received sources and reflects a social situation that was different from the world of transmitted sources" (p. 69).

Another noteworthy recorded document in chapter 4 is a complaint to the Han government stated by the non-Chinese representatives from Kangju. Thus, this document reflects two aspects of the literate community constructed in the border regions: First, it seems that the border of the literate community is blurry and expanded beyond Han territory. Second, it also indicates that a kind of linguistic translation must have occurred when the complaint was uttered by

the Kangju representatives and listened to and recorded by the Han government (pp. 74–75).

From the title of chapter 5, "Composited Texts," it is clear that the texts are created by assembly. This mode of composition "functioned through piecing together textual components to make something new" with a specific purpose shared by local people (p. 78). The main example of the composited texts is a personal letter placed alongside an imperial edict. The juxtaposition of two different sources of the texts suggests that this composited text was used as "a form of a wish" and an "expression of goodwill" (p. 85). Of the two examples discussed in this chapter, the king's staff (*wangzhang* 王杖) texts are of a great interest (pp. 86–92). The texts are seen to be the legal privileges granted to the holder of the king's staff, who is a man of advanced age. The king's staff texts are from graves, which also explain that they are used as an honor buried together with the dead. The giver is the Han emperor; thus, the king's staff texts—containing various texts for personal purposes—illustrate the connection between the border regions and the center of the empire (pp. 92–93). Overall, the composite texts, according to the author, show similar functions to literary anthologies and collections even though they are "brief and unsophisticated in form," and this characteristic connects to the modes of creation by assembly in the higher level of Han literary production (p. 93).

The texts treated in chapter 6 are similar to present-day manuals of "how to do things" and how to visually evaluate objects or animals (xxi). Three different kinds of "Practical Texts" are compared in this chapter: The first one is a simple, explicit, and straightforward text on evaluating swords for less-educated and inexpert readers (e.g., soldiers); the second text is a more "complicated structure, recondite formulations, and difficult vocabulary" (xxii) text on the visual evaluation of horses that seems to aim for a more educated readership; the third one showcases a multifunctional text—on brewing beer—that contains practical and ritual purposes. Apparently, the practical texts presented in this chapter not only provide us a sense of evaluating criteria for various objects and animals in the Han era, but they also allow modern readers to gain an understanding of multifaceted Han culture and commoner's daily life in the border regions.

While previous chapters deal with texts concerning commoners' lives, circumstances, and the like in the border regions, the "cultural texts" referred in chapter 7 are texts' "embodied cultivation" (xxii). Due to the problems and limitations created by the term "culture," the author notes, "After all, at some level all texts could be deemed cultural. Yet the texts of intellectual history and literature that I treat together here represent a particular type of cultivation" (p. 117). He explains that this term "is intended as a description, not to assert that they form a generic type" (xxii). For example, some of the texts he

discusses in this chapter include the materials from *Analects, Book of Documents,* as well as the texts that quote *Book of Odes* poems.

The topic of chapter 8 is letters. One unique feature revealed in these letters is the content that carries a more personal tone and conveys more emotion even though these letters are created by or addressed to low-rank officials in the northwestern region. Most of the time, the creators and addressees of these letters know each other through work relationships, but the subject matters treated in these letters are often concerned more with the individuals' lives in the border. Another unique feature noted by the author is that these letters "go beyond the creator/addressee dichotomy" (p. 140). The contents of the letters often illustrate that they involve a group of people who through the letters interact with each other and maintain the community. Women are notably included in these exchanges—a fact that reflects their "active participation in the social life of the community" and in the epistolary culture (p. 141). The author's remarks are best represented in his discussion on the letter, "Xuan to Yousun and His Wife." It is also important to point out that this letter illustrates a rare case of directly addressing the wife alongside her husband (pp. 141–144).

In my view, I found the letters discussed in chapter 8 the most interesting in the entire book, mainly because they are personal and emotional. These letters surely reveal more about individual lives and the interaction each individual has with the texts and with their social community, if compared with other cases discussed in the preceding chapters. Thus, I would recommend reading this chapter first if one needs to make a choice among all chapters.

In relation to the structure of the book, I think it is very easy to follow and approachable, even to the extent that each chapter can stand alone as it is, and readers can choose any chapter to begin with. There are two reasons for this: First, each chapter in nature is a case study of relevant documents; and second, the author begins each chapter with a brief summary of the key points in the preceding chapter or chapters, and concludes with a preview of the chapter that follows. (It is certainly true if readers can read the first two chapters first to familiarize themselves with the author's research framework and main argument.) This way of organizing his six case studies (from chapter 3 to chapter 8) in fact helps readers grasp a better understanding of key points argued in the book. Sanft has successfully accomplished the tasks by giving the reader a compelling argument and a meticulous analysis and interpretation of his source materials.

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