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Imperial China: A Beginner's Guide by Peter Lorge (review)

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network of drugs in the medieval periods? These questions delve beyond the scope of this book. Still, I hope the readers keep in mind that medieval China was very much open to the influence of various cultures beyond Dunhuang and was impacted by neighboring cultures in East Asia.

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NOTES

1. Huaiyu Chen, “Zoomancy/Divination by Animals,” in Stephen Kory, ed., *Handbook of Chinese Divination Techniques* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

2. Huaiyu Chen, “A Preliminary Study on a Case of the Exchange of Medical Knowledge between Daoxuan and Sun Simiao (Daoxuan yu Sun Simiao yixue jiaoliu zhi yizheng lico 道宣與孫思邈醫學交流之一證蠡測),” *Dunhuang Tulufan yanjiu 敦煌吐魯番研究* 9 (2006): 403–408.



Peter Lorge. *Imperial China: A Beginner's Guide*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2021. xiv, 194 pp. Paperback \$14.95, ISBN 978-1-78607-578-9.

Imperial China: A Beginner's Guide provides an overview of Chinese history from the 200s B.C.E. through the early twentieth century. Peter Lorge keeps the reader rapt with a thoughtful collection of topics, briskly paced chapters, and provocative analysis. It is a concise and delightful book which will be appreciated by beginners and specialists alike.

Imperial China consists of an introduction and eleven chapters, covering a range of topics key to understanding China's past. In the Introduction, Lorge outlines history prior to the advent of imperial China, defines the temporal, ethnic, and geographical scopes of “imperial China,” introduces Confucius and his Ruism (Lorge's choice of term to replace Confucianism), and surveys the varieties of spoken and written language under the umbrella term “Chinese language.” Chapter 1, “Foundations,” is an introduction to the basic ideological positions of the imperial Chinese state, particularly how a “continual struggle for moral and legal authority” lay at the heart of the successful centralization of state power (p. 26). Chapter 2 examines “dynasty,” the fundamental building block of imperial China, and surveys major dynasties by identifying their

commonalities and distinctions. While the politically unified, geographically expansive dynasties stand out as exemplars of their category, Lorge does not forget the periods of disunion and attributes a section to them under the rubric of “other dynasties.” In chapter 3, “Borders,” Lorge guides the reader on an examination of the geography of what he calls the “Chinese ecumene” and demonstrates how the landmass can be divided into socioeconomic “macroregions” (p. 50). Local identity, as Lorge points out, was essential to the social, cultural, and economic lives of historical individuals despite the fact that large concepts of China and imperial government always seemed to occupy the foreground.

From chapter 4 onward, Lorge delves into more specific topics. In chapter 4, he offers a comprehensive picture of war and the military, discussing the instrumentality of war in creating and maintaining a dynasty, the evolution of military technology, the organization of Chinese armies, the invention of gunpowder and the gun, and the history of military thought. Chapter 5 discusses what we conventionally categorize as science and technology under the heading “discovery.” In the same chapter, Lorge also discusses naval expeditions carried out by Chinese merchants and diplomats. Chapter 6 surveys religions, including the worship of popular gods and the more organized traditions known as Ruism, Buddhism, and Daoism. In chapter 7, Lorge anatomizes the imperial Chinese economy by analyzing the regulatory role of the state, the evolution of money, and the development of markets.

In the next two chapters Lorge takes the reader on a tour of the arts of imperial China. Chapter 8 is a survey of elite arts. Lorge presents the histories of literature, calligraphy, painting, and architecture, analyzing these subjects as indispensable parts of the political activities and cultural agendas of social elites. Chapter 9 shifts the focus away from elites to areas of “considerable crossover” between elite and popular arts, such as decorative arts (e.g., ceramics and silk), gardens, theater, and popular storytelling (p. 140).

Chapter 10, titled “Constructing China through History,” examines the tradition of historical writing in imperial China. It informs the reader of yet another new topic—the composition of history as a scholarly tradition and an arena for the construction of state power. More importantly, the chapter underscores how any modern rendition of imperial Chinese history (including the current book) is inevitably a product of a documentary tradition imbued with specific values and agendas. By illuminating the orientations and goals of imperial Chinese historians, Lorge cautions the reader that our understanding of China has been constantly shaped by the choices of these historians, thus always requiring critical reflection. This reminder provides a nice segue to the concluding chapter, where Lorge draws some general lessons for a balanced understanding of imperial China. He identifies the pitfalls of using imperial history to favor orthodoxy, to legitimize modern territorial claims, or to defend an ever-unified China. He again highlights the inherent diversity in land,

culture, and human community while also demonstrating how the unity of China has been maintained through language, ritual, and economic integration.

Imperial China is highly effective in addressing the biases in conventional Western views of China. As Lorge notes upfront, “any introduction to Chinese history in a Western language [...] confronts the place of Chinese history in the Western historical imagination” (p. 2). He constructs *Imperial China* with a heightened sense of this historical positionality, adroitly weaving revisionist critiques of Western stereotypes into the narrative of the book. Examples are abundant, and I will cite just a few. To counter the Orientalist view of an “unchanging” China, Lorge introduces the dynasties with an emphasis on their differences, paying special heed to qualitative transformations and irreversible breaks. In his presentation, the Chinese dynasties came to form a multifarious landscape characterized by discontinuity and differentiation. The narrative on science, technology, and exploration in chapter 5 challenges another prevailing modernist bias which contrasts a technologically backward China with a scientific and industrial Europe. In showcasing imperial China’s technological discoveries, Lorge is also careful to avoid the Needhamian mistake of grafting them onto the trajectories of Western experience and cramming China into a Eurocentric comparison.

The nuances of *Imperial China* certainly go beyond refuting popular misconceptions; in fact, Lorge presents a series of arguments well worth the attention of China specialists. His handling of “China” and “Chineseness” is commendable. It is no easy task to analyze a “China” with shifting territories, fluid borders, and a changing, multiethnic population without resorting to some form of essentialism; nor is it wise, due to such complexity, to dispose of the concept “China” in an introductory text. While constantly highlighting the fluidity of China in the foreground, Lorge has proved able to make sense of this fluidity with clear and innovative analyses. He makes the case for “dynasty” as a political instrument employed by the ruling elites to claim continuity and fix other historical categories; the analytic force of the concept of dynasty, therefore, makes it possible for modern scholars to use China as a “unit of analysis” (p. 43). Lorge’s expertise in military history contributes to the conceptualization of China in refreshing ways. He suggests that the border of any Chinese polity in effect hinged on the “operational reach of a government’s armed forces,” thereby explicating the constant flux of Chinese territory with a new, concrete cause (p. 8). He also argues that the army was as much for maintaining order in a dynasty as for creating it via violence, which adds a new perspective to understanding the durability of a Chinese polity, a dominantly civil entity in conventional interpretations.

The writing of *Imperial China* is admirably free of jargon. Lorge’s accessible style is built on a judicious consideration of analytical categories rather than on a simple compliance with popular language. In cases where Lorge adopts a less familiar term in lieu of a standard one, he usually does so for broad reasons

congruent with the overall interpretative agenda of the book. For example, he rejects “Confucianism,” a term widely used in popular and scholarly discourse, for reasons I find convincing: the coinage of “Confucianism” emerged from purposeful misrepresentations by Western missionaries and modern Chinese intellectuals, and to retain the term is to preserve the type of Western bias Lorge is keen to stave off throughout the book.

The combination of accessibility and rigor makes *Imperial China* a great read for a broad audience. A compelling beginners’ guide, it will also be a thought-provoking read for high school and college students. Instructors can either assign the book in its entirety in survey classes or use certain chapters to guide thematic discussions of Chinese history. *Imperial China* is a fine example of communicating sophisticated scholarship to a general audience.

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Christopher Rea. *Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. xvi, 381 pp. Hardcover \$120.00, ISBN 9780231188128. Paperback \$30.00, ISBN 9781231188135.

Christopher Rea’s *Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949* is a timely introduction to extant Chinese fiction films made before 1949. Rea analyzes fourteen films according to their “artistic accomplishment, critical reception, historical significance, and availability” (p. 4), situating them in relation to their broader tumultuous historical, sociopolitical, and cultural context. Differing from but building on previous significant scholarship about early Chinese cinema, such as Zhang Zhen’s *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (2005) and Weihong Bao’s *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (2015), *Chinese Film Classics* is a valuable addition to the field that makes early Chinese film history and analysis accessible, and familiarizes general readers with the diverse styles and creative vitality of early Chinese filmmakers.

The book is divided into two parts, with each of the fourteen chapters offering production information, a synopsis, and analysis of one film. The films