

Liang Cai, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 288 pp., \$85.00 (hardback) \$27.95 (paperback).

Cai sets out to accomplish a major sinological feat: to revise the accepted date for when Confucian political ideology became a significant part of Chinese imperial rule. Currently set at 135 BCE, Cai closely investigates the historical evidence, focusing mostly on Sima Qian's *The Grand Scribe's Records* (*Shiji*, c. 100 BCE) and Ban Gu's *History of the Western Han* (*Hanshu*, c. 90 CE), in order to demonstrate that it was only after a "witchcraft scandal" of 91–87 BCE that Confucians actually rose to power.

Chapter 1 examines the biographies of officials in power during the reign of Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE) in order to illustrate the range of career paths of the hereditary nobles, military generals, lawyers, and economists who were the majority of the elite of the time. Providing a detailed understanding of how the political hierarchy in the early, or Western, Han Dynasty (206 BCE–CE 9) worked, Cai explains how various forms of hereditary privilege and favoritism gave distinct advantages to candidates for elite official positions. Cai also enters the ongoing debate about the Chinese term *ru* 儒, usually translated as "Confucian," and presents a convincing argument that during this period "*ru*" was associated with learning the historical documents known as the Five Classics, but not with Confucius — until *after* Sima Qian made this direct connection.

Chapter 2 demonstrates how the historian Sima Qian, in his famous chapter "The Collective Biographies of *Ru*," actually created the idealized meaning of *ru*, as "learned official," to critique existing forms of hierarchy and nepotism in the political realm and to legitimize power and prestige among those who had learned the Five Classics. Central to Cai's evidence is her well-argued claim that Sima redefined politics for future readers when he wrote his chapter on *ru*, not to accurately represent the state of affairs during Emperor Wu's life, but to provide an idealized model upon which *ru* could learn to work together, end their incessant bickering, and join forces. Since Sima's chapter illustrates a unified community of *ru* officials, scholars have used it as evidence that Confucianism was a central

political ideology by Wu's time; however, Cai explains how this image is contradicted by all other supporting evidence of the time.

Chapter 3 illustrates how Sima Qian's and Ban Gu's politically charged writing posthumously unified the various disadvantaged and fragmented *ru* groups so that they could succeed and thrive. Thus Cai argues we should credit Sima Qian, not earlier thinkers such as Dong Zhongshu, with providing Confucians and "learned officials" the impetus and ability necessary to take power and even become central to China's political system. As a result, the powerful families under Wu's reign disappeared by his successor's takeover, and a new class of elites rose from obscure backgrounds to fill the power vacuum: the *ru* officials. Of course, the transition to complete power was not smooth, as Cai discusses in chapters 4 and 5. Rumors of "witchcraft," "black magic," and treason surrounded Emperor Wu toward the final years of his reign, which called his line of succession into question and created a void into which the *ru*-officials stepped. It is here in chapter 4 where "witchcraft" is finally revealed.

I wish that I could report to *Pomegranate* readers that the text lived up to its exciting title, which seems to promise a substantial discussion of "witchcraft" in early China; however, the text only spends nine pages (143–51) discussing the series of accusations that were leveled at members of the elite class and the emperor's family charging them with employing "shamans," doing "witchcraft," and practicing "black magic." The first six pages of this examination briefly introduce the concept of "witchcraft" in Emperor Wu's context, and the final three pages explain the resulting "witch hunt" as a likely foil for organized political intrigue to usurp power of the firmly entrenched elite families.

This tragic episode seems to have begun in February of 91 BCE when the Emperor Wu's Grand Coachman, Gongsun Jingsheng, was arrested for embezzlement, and Gongsun's father, a Chancellor, attempted to bail him out by trading his son's life for that of one of the country's most wanted criminals who was just arrested. This felon wrote a formal complaint from prison accusing the Coachman of having illicit sexual relations with Wu's princess cousin and claiming that the Gongsun family employed a "shaman" to place a curse on the Emperor and to bury magically charged poppets under a horse path that the emperor used, in order to cause him great illness. Hearing this, the emperor ordered the execution of the whole Gongsun family, as well as the princess and her sister—and thus began the "witchcraft scandal."

It seems that illness struck the aging Emperor Wu later that summer, and traveling to his retreat home did not cure his symptoms. Wu became convinced that his illness was due to some form of “witchcraft”; therefore, he ordered a broad investigation. According to the historical sources, the authorities and other “shamans” uncovered much evidence, and everyone found to be praying to “evil spirits,” doing harmful magic, and the like were arrested and killed. These “witch hunts” ended with the death of Emperor Wu in 87 BCE, among tens of thousands of other lifeless people blamed for all manner of nefarious and wicked deeds.

Clearly Cai’s work is a political history of early China, which attends to minute details of the texts she examines, but where is the critical reflection on the contentious key terms being used in this latter section of her book? Cai discusses the term “witchcraft” being used to translate two Chinese words, *wugu* 巫蠱, meaning “shaman” and “poison,” and by her extension “the art of directing malevolent spirits to harm people” (146). However, this translation is used here without analysis regarding the adequacy of the term, especially given the importance among anthropologists and religious studies scholars regarding the use of appropriate terminology. It is unclear that the “traditional use” of “witchcraft” to translate *wugu* is suitable to describe a person who contracts a shaman, “cunning” man or woman, or other folk healer or ritualist to create a poison to harm someone. Here, we see a nineteenth-century pejorative usage of the terms “witch” and “witchcraft” without question or due reflection on the technical uses of the terms in this, or other, contexts—such as contemporary Western meanings associated with folk magic and healing practices.

For example, it is unclear how or why the neutral meaning of the phrase “the [*wugu*] offer sacrifices to spirits and practice incantations (*wugu ciji zhuzu* 巫蠱祠祭祝詛)” (146) becomes the negative “shamanic curses 祝詛” (lit. “to bless and swear/curse”) and “the utterance of evil prayers at night 夜祠” (146) (lit. “night offerings”). The author’s hermeneutic steps between “sacrifices and incantations,” much as would be done for the court or to heal an ill patient, and “curses and evil prayers” seems to be more closely related to interpretations of “witchcraft” than to what is contained in the Chinese itself. If we recall that the earliest Westerners to visit China and to translate historical documents were Christian missionaries and avowedly Christian scholars, it is understandable why terms such as “witch” and “witchcraft” were used to translate terms for someone

who would poison another for gain—these are the very terms used in the King James Bible to translate the Hebraic term *kashaph* meaning “poisoner” in Deuteronomy 18:11–12 and Exodus 22:18 (i.e., “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”). However, it is time that China Studies—even a political exposé such as this—moves beyond 19th century Christian interpretations of Chinese folk practices.

The same case may be made for the terms associated with “shaman”: we have no evidence that ancient Chinese “shamans” have a historical connection to the Siberian (Tungusic language) root *šaman*—although the northern Chinese Manchus derive from this same language and cultural group. Some of the Chinese ritual specialists’ practices have similarities, such as communicating with the gods and spirits, possessing healing powers, performing incantations and exorcisms, praying for rain, and interpreting dreams, but these claims are common among many religious groups. There are also clear differences as well in that little evidence suggests indigenous Siberian shamans presided over state sacrifices and divinatory rituals or that early Chinese shamans utilized the well-known trance-states associated with Siberian shamans. Therefore, we must critically analyze the appropriateness of this term “shaman” for the ancient Chinese practices. Continuing to propagate a colonialist usage of this term is problematic in that it does not clarify any of the details about the *wu*, technically female ritualists, their positions throughout society, or their variety of practices, and it conflates the Chinese context with more specific meanings of the term.

Additionally, I found no critical reflection of Cai’s seeming phenomenological acceptance of Sima Qian’s and Ban Gu’s claims about “black magic,” “sorcery,” and “witchcraft” although her own discovery of political explanations for the “witch hunts” likely negates the reality that the many accused people were actually doing heterodox practices. This line of reflection makes me wonder: how much of Wu’s story might be due to actual ill-intentioned rituals, and how much could be due to his documented paranoia, social hysteria, or wide-spread hallucinations á la the 1692 Salem witch trials? In this way, I think that Cai’s work can provide an insightful case study for cross-cultural examination.

Uncovering a world of political in-fighting and vying for power, Cai presents a ground-breaking reading of relevant historical materials regarding why we should re-evaluate our previous ideas about how and when Confucianism became an influential state ideology. Being one of many scholars fascinated by questions of the growth

and spread of ideologies, the exercise of hegemonic forces to define acceptability, and the dynamics of social change, I find this book offers an insightful examination of how a completely unorganized and marginalized minority group capitalized on a particular set of circumstances and exercised what little power they had (in a Foucaultian sense) in order to become the authoritative model upon which the next two thousand years of Chinese politics and civilization would be founded. Cai re-contextualizes scholarly knowledge about the various political and ideological changes that took place during the latter half of the Western Han Dynasty, which ultimately had dramatic effects on China's history.

Writing in a clear and accessible way that paints a vivid and comprehensive picture of the state of the early Han political system with its variety of political machinations, Cai has produced a well-structured and well-argued monograph that includes detailed notes and a wide range of references in English, Chinese, and Japanese, although she shows a tendency to repeat previously established information and facts in her writing. As such, scholars and graduate students of early China, Chinese history and politics, and Confucianism will get the most from this book. However, Cai provides a very good model of closely reading ancient texts from multiple perspectives, and her examination of China's hierarchical structure among elites and the government could also be useful for anyone doing cross-cultural studies of any of the issues discussed here, including "witchcraft."

*Shawn Arthur*  
*Wake Forest University*