

Mark Edward Lewis. *China between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009. 347 pp. Includes index, bibliography, illustrations, and maps. Hardcover \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-674-02605-6.

Mark Lewis's volume is the second in a series, which began with *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han*, and continued with a further volume on *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty*, written in collaboration with Timothy Brook, editor of the series, and published in 2009. Further volumes by Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* (2010), and by William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: the Great Qing* (2009), bring the Belknap project to the early twentieth century. It is an impressive collection of general history and a valuable survey of the field.

In all Chinese history, the Period of Division, *Nanbei chao* or the Northern and Southern Dynasties, from the early third to the late sixth century C.E., is one of the most complex and difficult to deal with. Lewis's primary title, *China between Empires*, indicates the heart of the problem: the people of the time had little idea that the Sui and Tang were waiting for them—they lived in a world where Han was past and the present was political disorder. Historians of recent times are accustomed to dealing with generations and even centuries of apparent stability under the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing, defined even by the titles of those dynasties. In contrast, it can be found hard to contemplate a period dominated by ephemeral states, each contending over the fragments of a unified civilization and unable either to establish control over any significant region nor to survive more than a few years before being conquered by a rival or overthrown by revolt and subversion. Whereas at other times the imperial court could be seen as the cultural center of the Chinese world, during these four hundred years, the various governments were weak and marginal, and most leaders of the community remained aloof. In particular, as the sixth-century Yan Zhitui wrote in his *Family Instructions*, a wise gentleman avoided any involvement in military affairs; that led always to disaster.¹

Appropriately, Lewis provides only a summary of the formal political and military history of the period. After a first chapter on the geography of North and South China, the second chapter deals with the rise of the great families—a development already well attested during the second century under the Later Han. The third chapter, "Military Dynasticism," traces the history of a time when, as Lewis observes, "south China had a dynasty with no army, while north China had armies but no dynasty" (p. 73). In the early fourth century, the remnants of the Jin dynasty, which had briefly restored the empire of Han but was then driven south of the Yangzi by non-Chinese enemies, held that position for a hundred years, but then gave way to the Song dynasty founded by Liu Yu, succeeded in turn by the Qi, Liang, and Chen, each lasting some thirty or forty years. In the north, similarly

short-lived states of the fourth century were little more than armed bands under a successful leader, falling apart when he was defeated or died. During the course of the fifth century, the Murong clan of the non-Chinese Xianbi succeeded in unifying North China under the Wei dynasty and sought to establish a Chinese cultural state based upon the ancient capital of Luoyang, but within a few years, mutiny among frontier garrisons brought the government to ruin. Two successors, the Eastern and Western Wei, were subverted by nominal subordinates, and one of those, the Northern Zhou, was taken over in turn. With a secure base and a dedicated army, the new Sui dynasty destroyed its rivals in the north, and in 589—four hundred years after the effective fall of the Han—its troops crossed the Yangzi to overthrow the southern empire of Chen and restore a form of unity to China.

Against this disorganized political background, Lewis's next chapters attend to social and intellectual aspects of the period: chapters 4 and 5 on cities and countryside and chapter 6 on contact with the states and people beyond China. Chapter 7, "Defining Kinship," considers family and society, and Chapter 8 deals with religion. An imaginative ninth chapter, "Writing," discusses literature, including the development of lyric and other poetic styles, and the first great anthologies including *Wen xuan* (Selections of Refined Literature) together with philosophy, based upon *Xuanxue* (Study of the Mysteries), which emerged in the early third century and held influence throughout the period with an emphasis on transcendence and human spontaneity.

This period, of course, saw the development of Buddhism in China, rivaling Taoism and Confucianism among the educated gentry and gaining widespread belief among the common people.² As a sophisticated philosophy, Buddhism had appeal to men of learning, while its institutional structure offered a degree of security and support in turbulent times. Official attitudes varied: some non-Chinese states endorsed monks and their teachings just because they, too, were of alien origin, while Chinese rulers might seek legitimacy through sponsorship of Buddhism or through its persecution in favor of the native beliefs. Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou sought to suppress Buddhism and Taoism in favor of Confucianism, but Yang Jian, founding emperor Wen of the Sui, called upon the Confucian tradition of the Son of Heaven while also identifying himself as an ideal monarch defending the Buddhist faith. Furthermore, when the Li family of the Tang succeeded the Sui, they endorsed all three concepts, claiming relationship to the legendary Li Er, best known as the sage Laozi.

At the same time, not unrelated to this, there was new interest in and admiration for the world of nature. Formerly seen primarily as background for human concerns in the great hunting and city rhapsodies of the Han, or as symbols of human emotion in Wang Can's "Rhapsody on Climbing a Tower" or Cao Cao's *Jieshi* poem, from the third century, landscape began to be recognized in its own terms, an essential part of the world with which humans could have a relationship,

which was not of itself hostile and needed to be placated, but which could be appreciated both for its beauty and for the possibility of approaching the true Way.³ In similar fashion, the fourth-century artist Gu Kaizhi composed an essay on the depiction of mountains, speaking in part through the persona of Zhang Daoling, legendary founder of the Taoist church (pp. 21–22). Such mental and emotional transformation would lead to the splendors of painting and poetry in the Song period and beyond.

In little more than 250 pages of main text, Lewis can present only a summary of the period, but he offers interesting and challenging ideas and interpretations. He has detailed notes and a thorough bibliography, and although the majority of his sources and citations are secondary, mostly in Western languages and indeed in English, he has made excellent use of them. There is currently no comparable single-volume account of the period.⁴

Writing on such a scale, however, it is not practical to go into the detail of every event or development, and there are occasions when Lewis makes firm but mistaken statements:

- The crisis that destroyed the power of the Han followed the death of Emperor Ling in 189, not in 186 (p. 32).
- When Guan Yu attacked Cao Cao in 219, he did not advance down the Han River from present-day Sichuan, but up the Han from the middle Yangzi (pp. 35–36). This was a very different strategic situation and allowed Sun Quan to strike him from behind and seize the whole of Jing province. Although Sun Quan's initiative was useful to Cao Cao, it is probable that he acted quite independently and for his own advantage.⁵

These are minor matters, but they show that some things need to be checked, and Lewis's dates are not always reliable.

More substantially, though Professor Lewis begins his work with a discussion of the geography of north and south China, and includes an account of the migration from north to south from the time of Han, I believe that he fails to give sufficient emphasis to the demographic changes between north and south during Later Han, which had great effect over the longer term.

Two hundred years earlier, although the fall of Wang Mang in 23 had been followed by almost fifteen years of civil war, China was reunited by Liu Xiu, founding Emperor Guangwu of the Later Han. Once he had control of the North China plain, he had no great difficulty in dealing with local warlords of the middle and lower Yangzi, and his last major enemy, in present-day Sichuan, was isolated and destroyed. As the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* novel would put it, one empire had divided, but another appeared to take its place.

In the early third century, however, Cao Cao faced a different situation: although he had occupied Jing province as far as the middle Yangzi, he was halted at the Red Cliffs by the army of Sun Quan, who controlled the lower course of the river and who sent troops to support Liu Bei. Unlike the end of the Former Han, the lands of the south now held a Chinese population large enough to withstand

the forces of the north. The Sun family state of Wu maintained an energetic policy of expansion and colonization to gain more troops, and though they were compelled to submit to Western Jin in 280, the foundations they laid became the salvation of Eastern Jin after the disastrous invasion of non-Chinese peoples thirty years later.

During all this period, moreover, the turmoil and political confusion first caused by the destruction of the administrative system of the Han under the stress of rebellion and civil war, followed by the incursions of non-Chinese tribes, was prolonged and exacerbated by the withdrawal of landed families from governments north and south. The stability of the Han had relied heavily upon a natural alliance between the central power and the gentry clans that provided members of the bureaucracy to serve. An essential condition for unification under the Sui and Tang was the fact that their rulers gained and kept acceptance and support from civilian leaders of the community.

In that regard, the disaffection of leading local families, manifested increasingly during the Later Han, weakened that dynasty and led to its fall. The reluctance and refusal of such families to support the new states that appeared during the centuries that followed maintained that instability and division. The imagination and the individualism of the people of that time were important and valuable, but they came at a price.

Rafe de Crespigny

Rafe de Crespigny's major interest is the history of the Later Han and the Three Kingdoms.

NOTES

1. *Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓, cited by Lewis at page 178.
2. The core work on this topic remains Erik Zürcher's *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, first published in 1959 and reprinted by Brill in 2007.
3. See, for example, Donald Holzman, *Landscape Appreciation in Ancient and Early Medieval China: The Birth of Landscape Poetry* (Taiwan: Tsing Hua University, 1995).
4. The first volume of *The Cambridge History of China*, dealing with the Qin and Han, appeared in 1986, and the third, on the Sui and Tang, in 1979. The intervening volume 2, however, which should deal with the period of division, has long been delayed, though there are now new plans for its compilation.
5. Rafe de Crespigny, *Generals of the South* (Canberra: Australia National University, 1990), pp. 398–400.