

BOOK REVIEW

*Le glaive et la charrue: Soldats et paysans chinois à la conquête de l'ouest: L'histoire d'un échec*

By **Éric Trombert**. Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 2020. 527 pp. \$130.68 (paper).

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*The Sword and the Plow: Chinese Soldiers and Peasants in the Conquest of the West: The Story of a Failure*. The preface explains the arresting title: this history of the Chinese colonization of the western regions, which include present-day Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Gansu, begins in the first century BCE, when the first Chinese soldiers went to modern Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, and ends in 640 CE, when the Tang dynasty forces conquered Turfan. That invasion, and the imposition of the equal-field system, marked a break from the earlier processes of settlement by soldiers and peasants, which are the focus of this book.

On one level, Trombert is responding to a specific Chinese government narrative as expressed in a government document dating to 2014. He devotes a box to this particular document on page 289. (The book's 45 boxes, or *encadrés*, are listed on pp. 497–98; addressing a specific topic, they each offer a refreshing and informative pause from the running text). Written on the sixtieth anniversary of the Production and Construction Corps of Xinjiang (Xinjiang Shengchan Jianshe Bingtuan 新疆生产建设兵团), the document explains that, for the past two thousand years, the central government (*zhongyang zhengfu*) had employed similar *tuntian* policies in Xinjiang. Trombert's immediate goal is to demonstrate that the policies of multiple dynasties were not identical and certainly differed from those of the modern *Bingtuan*.

More broadly, Trombert challenges the view of the Western Regions as a largely blank space occupied by nomads who never farmed and who had no civilization or writing system of their own. This is the argument of the one earlier full-length study of Han colonization of the Western Regions: Chang Chun-shu 丈春樹, *The Rise of the Chinese Empire, Vol. 2: Frontier, Immigration, and Empire in Han China, 130 B.C.–A.D. 157* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). Where Chang is interested in how the Han dynasty administered Juyan (in the valley of Etsin Gol in Inner Mongolia) and the impact of that experience on later Chinese dynasties, Trombert is more concerned with agriculture and the impact on the residents of the Western Regions.

As he makes his case, Trombert builds on the work of Western archaeologists who, in recent decades, have shown that the Xiongnu and other nomadic peoples practiced agriculture. Although typically not acknowledged in Chinese-language studies, the

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peoples living to the West developed bronze and iron metallurgy, domesticated the camel and the horse, and developed the horse-drawn chariot and wheat agriculture before those living in central China did.

Trombert is making an important point: contrary to received wisdom, the Chinese expansion during the Han dynasty and later centuries had only a minor impact on the Western Regions. Both Western and Chinese historians have exaggerated this impact: Trombert offers a respectful but devastating take-down (236 and continuing) of Erik Zürcher's 1990 article, "Han Buddhism and the Western Regions."<sup>1</sup>

Trombert uses an impressive range of sources: received literary texts including the dynastic histories, excavated documents in Chinese and Central Asian languages, archaeological excavations, and the extensive secondary literature in Chinese, English, French, German, and Japanese. He offers a compelling overarching synthesis that fully deserves translation into English and/or Chinese.

Trombert always considers the possibility that different practices often—and mistakenly—attributed to the Chinese might have originated in Central Asia. Combining close attention to textual and archaeological evidence, he explains how wheat and barley, which originated in the west, came to be cultivated alongside Broomcorn millet and foxtail millet, crops from the Yellow and Yangzi rivers. The privileging of wheat and barley over millet (the residents of both Turfan and Dunhuang in the first millennium grew more wheat and barley than the two types of millet) only ended in the tenth century (18–56). Offering an inspired reading of the dynastic histories, particularly their account of Li Ling, the general who surrendered to the Xiongnu, Trombert argues for continuous exchanges between the Han and the Xiongnu (197–233), and, after careful consideration of the documentary and visual evidence, shows that the Han Chinese had little lasting impact on the agricultural techniques used in Central Asia (234–276).

Over a long career, Trombert has established a reputation as a first-rate historian. His writings about Kucha, Turfan, and Dunhuang between 600 and 1000 display broad expertise in multiple fields: cereal crops, grapes, wine-making, cotton, and irrigation. His most stimulating article in my opinion—on the nature of the Silk Road trade—is unfortunately still available only in French.<sup>2</sup> The author of multiple articles in English and many more articles and books in French, Trombert could easily have sewn his earlier articles together to form a book, but he chose not to. He is writing about much of the material in this book for the first time.

The book begins with a suggestive comparison to the work of Paul Veyne on Roman imperialism, which notes that the express desire to expand came late in Roman history and without a preconceived plan (9). Trombert is certainly thinking about the Roman army, but it is not clear in which period or which aspects of the comparison with China he finds most instructive. The Romans did build forts at the edges of their frontiers, where they stationed troops, but they never recruited farmers to settle as the Chinese did. After Augustus (31 BCE—14 CE) established a professional army, soldiers received minimal pay during their years of service but a huge bonus equal to fifteen years of salary when they retired. This encouraged the former soldiers to settle near their forts, many which were on the edges on the Roman empire. This system persisted until

<sup>1</sup>Erik Zürcher, "Han Buddhism and the Western Regions," in *Thought and Law in Qin and Han China*, ed. Wilt Idema and Zürcher (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 158–82.

<sup>2</sup>Éric Trombert, "Textiles et tissus sur la route de la soie. Éléments pour une géographie de la production et des échanges," in *La Séricinde, terre d'échanges*, ed. Jean-Pierre Drège (Paris: La Documentation française, 2000), 107–20.

the fourth century and seems most similar to what Trombert discusses, but the Romans never encouraged the migration of farmers to the frontier as the Chinese did.<sup>3</sup> Trombert could have explained more fully his understanding of the processes of imperialism, colonization, and migration and how they varied under different Chinese dynasties.

The first wave of Chinese migrations to the west, launched in the first century BCE, resulted from the expansion of the Han military to modern Inner Mongolia to counter the threat of the Xiongnu empire. Trombert compares what the transmitted texts, particularly the dynastic histories, have to say about military colonies (58–101) with a detailed examination of excavated texts from Juyan (102–196, Carte [map] 7 of settlements on p. 112). The word *tuntian* 屯田 is often translated as a noun phrase, but it originated as a verbal phrase meaning to “station troops to cultivate fields” (82, encadré no. 3). Soon after it acquired the meaning of the noun for a military colony, which it has retained for two thousand years. Trombert translates the description of the *tuntian* system given by the Imperial Counselor Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 (fl. 152–180) which envisaged the first stage of settlement by soldier farmers who would cultivate the first few harvests. In the second stage of colonization, the soldiers would be replaced by peasants from China who would be accompanied by their families (80–81).

Given the centrality of the term *tuntian*, it's surprising to learn that it appears nowhere in the considerable number of documents—mostly slips written on bamboo—from Juyan. Trombert identifies three stages of a colony: 1) the dispersal of those who fought in battle and the creation of *tuntian*, 2) the withdrawal of the farmer-soldiers, and 3) the creation of civil districts following the departure of the military (195). Excavated documents show that the soldiers farmed collectively while civilians and their families worked individual plots.

The scattered evidence allows Trombert to answer an important question: could the colonies grow enough food to pay for themselves? No. As he explains, “it appears that the harvests produced by soldiers in the colonies came with the price of exhausting, minimally productive, labor, which they performed as part of their military service. It represented only a small part of the budget necessary to accomplish their tasks and provide them with support” (186–195). As their oscillating history of creation and abandonment reveals, the military colonies never received the support from the central government that they required to survive.

The book closes with a detailed examination of the terrain and agriculture of the Kroraina Kingdom and Loulan in the Tarim Basin in the third and fourth centuries CE (277–406). After the fall of the Han dynasty, the succeeding regional dynasties encouraged displaced peasants to migrate west and settle in these locations. The military of the Cao Wei dynasty (220–265) occupied Loulan with no plan for subsequent settlement by civilians, and there is little evidence of civilian presence in the military garrison (383–384). Trombert makes an interesting proposal: that the authorities ordered the troops stationed at Loulan to move to Turfan in the early 270s. Although there is no direct evidence for such an order, it fits the chronology of the documents at the two sites: the documents from Loulan peter out at this time, and the first dated document from Turfan, a contract for the purchase of a coffin, dates to 273 (428).

The final paragraph of the book explains how the analysis of Etsin Gol and the Tarim Basin fit together:

<sup>3</sup>Those interested in such comparisons may wish to consult Peter Fibiger Bang, C.A. Bayly, and Walter Scheidel, eds., *The Oxford World History of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

in the first moments of the conquest of the West, Sang Hongyang, Emperor Wu's minister who suggested the creation of military colonies at Luntai and Quli, had already recommended the rapid replacement of military workers by civilian families. But this statesmen who supported expansion by means of a totalitarian military-bureaucratic machinery could not have imagined all the consequences of such a substitution. One noticed only later that such a substitution regularly resulted in the weakening of *tuntian* and the emergence of competing modes of production that led to radical transformation of the agrarian countryside as it had been initially conceived by its promoters (465).

In the fifth and sixth centuries at Turfan, a series of contiguous oases (as the 1928 map from Aurel Stein, reproduced on p. 431, shows), individual cultivators practiced crop rotation, grew new crops such as cotton and wine grapes, and flourished economically—unlike the soldiers forced to practice the collective agriculture of the *tuntian* system. And that world—fueled by the agricultural innovations of individual cultivators—ended in 640 when the Tang armies conquered Turfan, which must be why Trombert calls his magnificent book the story of a failure.

The book has consistently high production values: four-color illustrations throughout, notes at the bottom of the page, extensive maps, and separate indices for names of places, names of individuals and peoples, and bureaucratic titles and government offices. This is a long book with 473 large pages of text, but as I finished it, I found myself wanting more. Perhaps Éric Trombert could be persuaded to write a successor volume that develops similar themes for the seventh to tenth centuries, the period that he knows so well? We are fortunate already to have first-rate studies of the Qing expansion into the West including Peter Perdue's *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2005) and James Milward's *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, new edition forthcoming in fall 2021), and it would be a major scholarly advance to have comparable studies for the period after *Le Glaive and La Charrue* ends and before Perdue's and Milward's books begin.