

Research Statement

The figure of the emperor played a critical role not only in securing order but also in defining and sustaining many of the cultural features of Chinese society, from religious practices to ethical standards. But what is the relation between the historical figures who occupied the throne and the traces they have supposedly left in the extant literature? In the past four-odd decades scholars have begun to reveal the “anonymous brushes and invisible hands”^{*} that participated in the construction of the imperial image, thereby challenging prevalent modes of reading and interpretation of historical accounts. This task is, however, far from complete. First, with some important exceptions, most of the above mentioned contributions pertain to the medieval to late-imperial periods. The four long centuries of Han rule (206 BCE – 220 CE) still await a critical examination that will uncover the mechanisms of imperial representation in this formative period in Chinese history. In addition, a complementary line of inquiry would be an examination of the implications of these strategies of representation on Chinese cultural history more broadly.

In my dissertation, “Presence and Praise: Writing the Imperial Body in Han China,” I approach this subject by examining references to the emperor’s body, presence, and performance in a variety of Han sources, with a focus on the early reigns of the Eastern Han (1st c. CE). At the core of this exploration is a text that fell under the radar of most early-China scholars, East and West, mostly due to a long interruption in its transmission. Cui Yin’s 崔駰 (d. 92) “Four Panegyrics for the Imperial Tours” 四巡頌 were preserved intact only in the *Wenguan cilin* 文館詞林 (J. *Bunkan shirin*; Forest of Words from the Literary Institute)—a seventh-century anthology that remained in circulation only in Japan through the nineteenth century—and are as yet untranslated, unannotated, and understudied. While the handful of mainland-Chinese scholars who have studied it focus on its value for the history of Han panegyric rhyme-prose, I argue that it further opens a window onto the various constructions of the imperial body and presence across different textual media, and calls for a reconsideration of the relation between the seemingly incompatible genres of historiography and panegyric poetry in the period under consideration. I pursue both these intellectual concerns in my dissertation, interrogating in particular the relation between metaphor and politics, body and representation, and history and praise.

Upon filing my dissertation (by June this year, with no oral defense required), I will spend the summer redrafting the second chapter for submission to a peer-reviewed journal (*T'oung Pao*), under the title “The Poetics of Praise: Cui Yin’s (d. 92) ‘Four Panegyrics for the Imperial Tours’ as Preserved in the *Bunkan shirin*.” Making these long-overlooked poetic pieces, along with their analysis, independently accessible to scholars will be a worthy contribution in itself. Then, at Tel Aviv University, I would begin expanding my dissertation towards a book manuscript tentatively titled *On Kings and Things: Bodies Politic and the Work of Metaphor in Early Imperial China*. The book will pursue questions broached in my dissertation and at the same time broaden the scope of inquiry to include other, interrelated questions: To what extent did embodied language and imagery frame the written discourse of rulership and political theory in Early China? How is it related to particular royal ritual practices on the one hand, and to a global comparative framework on the other hand? How did this dynamic shape literary representations of centralized political authority? And how did these, in turn, inform the language and imagination of Han and post-Han authors of literary and philosophical texts?

^{*} Christian de Pee, Review of Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Maggie Bickford, eds., *Emperor Hui-zong and Late Northern Song China*, in *China Review International* 14.2 (2007): 417.

As I currently conceive it, the book will be comprised of two main parts. The first part will engage three fields of inquiry with an emphasis on the relationship between them: first, the rhetoric of the imperial body as evident in the Han political discourse of rulership (for instance, tropes of royal speech and sovereign mobility); second, the problematics that surrounded the operation of certain political institutions (bureaucratic offices like the imperial Secretariat, or political practices like the imperial tour of inspection); and, third, the representation of related measures of imperial authority (such as downward official communications or imperial ritual performance) in historiographical records and court literature. One example for the latter are two previously unexplored imperial-tour panegyrics by Ma Rong 馬融 (79 – 166) and Liu Zhen 劉珍 (active 2nd c.). Like the fourfold set by Cui Yin, these date to the Eastern Han, fell out of circulation in China until the reintroduction of the *Wenguan cilin*, and are as yet untranslated and unannotated (the one previously known only from brief fragments, and the other previously unknown). With both historical and literary methods of analysis, as done in my study of Cui Yin’s rhyme-prose, I will tap these sources in order to gain new perspectives on the meeting between the body natural and the body politic in accounts of an emperor *en route*—perspectives that are not otherwise available in the extant contemporary records.

The second part of the book will examine the role that competing models of kingship and their related tropes, metaphors, and linguistic formulae have played in cultural production beyond the realm of political discourse *per se*. This will include case studies of texts from both the received and the excavated corpus that have so far received little critical attention, as well as an examination of their relation to Han and post-Han texts of various intellectual orientations. Among the texts to serve as a starting point for this kind of intertextual investigations are the divination verses of the *Forest of Changes* by Master Jiao (*Jiaoshi yilin* 焦氏易林; ca. 50 BCE to 50 CE); and the politico-cosmological text unearthed at Mawangdui, *Nine Rulers* (*Jiu zhu* 九主; MS *terminus ad quem* 168 BCE). Both record tropes that participate in debates over the definition of imperial power, and both, upon examination, will provide insight into the impact of the political discourse on the articulation of ideas that broadly pertain to philosophies of inner cultivation. Such is, I will argue, the linguistic formula that, in *Nine Rulers*, advances an ontological distinction between a ruler-creator and the ‘things’ (*wu* 物) of his creation—an enduring motif to which I allude in the project’s main title.

The postdoctoral seminar “Contextualizing the Self: Creating and Recreating the First Person” would be an excellent opportunity to launch this project, taking as an entry point the question of the impact of the political sphere on contemporary definitions of the self and its relation to the world. It has long been observed that in early China, as early as the third century BCE, the state, the cosmos, and the body formed a tripartite analogical structure and were thus shaped one in the image of the other. My project will throw light on certain details of these cognitive processes, while inquiring more broadly about the influence of political discourse and socio-political realities on philosophical inquiry, its language, and its conceptual tools. It is for this reason that I would look forward to work under the mentorship of Galia Patt-Shamir (East Asian Studies), whose extensive expertise in Chinese philosophical traditions as well as comparative frameworks of analysis would greatly benefit my project. In addition, there is a long list of scholars associated with the department of East Asian Studies with whom I would look forward to consult on issues pertaining to their expertise in the various disciplines interwoven in my study: from Chinese literature and historical writing, to the study of the body and modes of knowledge production. In this intellectual environment I expect to lay the foundations for an interdisciplinary project that will bring together several underexplored texts, incorporate them in a cross-generic inquiry, draw on related studies in anthropology, history, and cognitive linguistics, and uncover the relations between sovereignty, metaphor, and cultural production in early imperial China.