

Rudi Thomsen: *Ambition and Confucianism. A Biography of Wang Mang.* Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1988. 249 pp.

Rudi Thomsen has written extensively on ancient Greek and Roman history, especially on numismatics. An interest in world history has led him to the study of ancient China, resulting in 1983 in the publication of a popular synthesis of the major Western language studies within this field entitled *Oldtidens Kina* (Ancient China) and in 1988 in the publication of the book under review.

Rudi Thomsen was motivated to embark on writing a monograph on Wang Mang, sole emperor of the short-lived Xin dynasty (A.D. 9-23), because "nobody has ever written a biography in any Western language of this fascinating and provocative statesman" (preface). On the surface this statement is puzzling, as Wang Mang has received more intensive treatment by Western sinology than any other Han figure, the major source relating to him having been translated several times and several studies being devoted to his career and policies. By writing Wang Mang's "biography" Rudi Thomsen obviously intends to present a detailed narration of Wang Mang's life-story, but, more importantly, he also wishes to "attempt an assessment of [Wang Mang] as a man and statesman" (p. 208), to perform "an evaluation of his actions" by "elucidating his true, innermost motives" (p. 17). In other words, the author wishes to take part in the debate about Wang Mang's moral stature and political accomplishments, commencing in the first century A.D. with the evaluation of Wang Mang by Ban Gu in his *Han-shu* as a hypocritical exploiter of Confucianism, and continuing in this century by among other Hans Bielenstein who argues that, traditional opinion to the contrary, Wang Mang was quite a capable statesman.

Rudi Thomsen does not discuss the methodological issues involved in passing moral judgment on persons living two millenia ago, except perhaps when he criticizes several passages in which Ban Gu "ascribes the vilest motives imaginable to Wang Mang" with the following words: "Whether this is an accurate picture must, however, remain pure speculation, since we have just as little opportunity of reading Wang Mang's innermost thoughts as [Ban Gu]" (p. 43; see also p. 64). The author here perhaps takes a

somewhat extreme position regarding the possibility of knowing what other people think, but it becomes clear that in this passage he does not express his own methodological position, as one of the main conclusions of his book is that Wang Mang's Confucianism was "not - as alleged by [Ban Gu] - just a facade behind which [Wang Mang] hid his reckless ambition" (p. 216), that Wang Mang, in other words, possessed a "genuine Confucian conviction" (p. 127), that "a revival of the institutions of the golden past was a sincere wish on his part" (p. 131), that Confucian ideology was "a matter of faith for him" (p. 145), etc., etc. Rudi Thomsen in other words does seem to possess a way to fathom the "secret ends" (p. 56) of Wang Mang. Evaluations that other historians might be tempted to make in postscripts form the substance of Rudi Thomsen's book, and just as he evaluates Wang Mang according to whether he lived up to the ideals he is alleged to have espoused, Rudi Thomsen's book must be evaluated according to whether it assesses Wang Mang's character and accomplishments in a reasonable manner.

That evaluation is indeed the main goal of his book can be seen from the fact that Rudi Thomsen does not interpret the sources relating to Wang Mang's life in any significantly new way, nor does he present any novel views on the nature of Han society and politics that might elucidate Wang Mang's career and personality - nor indeed does he formulate any psychological theories to explain what motivated man in Han times.

Ban Gu has written a long memoir on Wang Mang and this Rudi Thomsen finds objective (in its narrative parts) and he labels Homer Dubs' solid translation of parts of the *Han-shu* (Wang Mang's memoir included) "one of the greatest advances within Western sinological research in this century" (p. 13 - see the equally immoderate praise of Hans O. Strange, "the well-known German sinologist" on the preceding page). The author thus obviates the need to know Chinese for those wishing to reach a balanced opinion about Wang Mang's faults and merits; the facts of Wang Mang's life are settled and laid out for all to see and the theory to account for them (however "flat" and commonsensical it may appear) has already been elaborated and is totally adequate - what remains for the historian to do is only to form a befitting judgment on the more interesting personages appearing in this Book of

History.

The systematization of the sources related to Wang Mang found in this book may have its usefulness, but the retelling of Ban Gu's Wang Mang memoir becomes pointless at times because of the lack of any analytical framework. There is no indication that the primary sources in their original language or secondary sources written in Chinese or Japanese have been drawn upon, but Rudi Thomsen does not state whether this is the case. An inattentive reader may miss the fact that Rudi Thomsen's discussions are based solely on Western sinological literature, as this is not to be expected in a book published by a university press with the support of the major institutions devoted to funding humanistic research in Denmark.

As hinted in the title of his book, Wang Mang's personality is analyzed by means of two concepts: ambition and Confucianism. Though his views on this are none too clear (p. 43, pp. 56-59), he seems to attempt a periodization of Wang Mang's moral evolution: during the time he made his way to the throne under the Han dynasty, Wang Mang, fuelled by ambition, with great success sought popularity by "a wily and hypocritical exploitation of the humility demanded by Confucians" (p. 57), but once on the throne his efforts, in spite of many failures, to "put the Confucian ideas into practice in order to bring about a harmonious ideal society" show "his basic, Confucian conviction" (p. 216). Wang Mang's first period was thus characterized by ambition and his second by Confucianism. Whether such a moral evolution, moving from adolescent indoctrination over hypocritical exploitation to earnest devotion is at all plausible is, I believe, open to doubt, but by splitting Wang Mang in two and not explaining what made him one, the author at least does not explain all that he set out to explain.

A major shortcoming of *Ambition and Confucianism* is the fact that though he uses the word "Confucian" quite often Rudi Thomsen shows little appreciation for the complexity and dynamics of Confucianism in Wang Mang's time. To take an example. On several occasions Rudi Thomsen remarks on Wang Mang's demonstrative generosity and sees it as a ploy to gain popularity. Anyone conversant with the primary literature would have noticed that many male imperial distaff relatives out to build up power at

court during the Han used the same strategy - the Han state even enacted a law forbidding the ostentatious distribution of gifts to the populace at large by such persons. In the pre-imperial period demonstrative gift-giving was likewise seen as a major way of gaining political prestige. But this does not automatically stamp such behaviour as hypocritical exploitation of "Confucian humility", for the generous bestowal of gifts on one's village or clan was equated with the prime Confucian virtue of benevolence (*ren*) by several Han and pre-Han thinkers (some of them "Confucians"), just as the same activities were criticized by other thinkers (some of them "Confucians"). As for the political use of massive distributions to the populace at large, one might even find sanction for this in the *Analects*, where Confucius praises the use of such means to establish a dynasty. Wang Mang's celebrated land reform proposal also embodies the element of redistribution, compelling local magnates by law to distribute land to their poorer neighbours, just as the sources allege that the "purer" among them did already. Surely facts of this nature are relevant to analyzing the ideology espoused by Wang Mang and surely they are available only to those able to read the languages generally required of scholars writing on sinological matters.

Though it is bad form for a reviewer to suggest that the author of the book reviewed should have written on a different subject, it nonetheless puzzles me that Rudi Thomsen, as an expert on Roman history, does not point out the parallels between Wang Mang and e.g. Caesar, as both built up their resounding reputation by displays of overwhelming generosity. Perhaps Rudi Thomsen is not an adherent of the clientela theory of Roman society and politics, but he elsewhere shows himself most willing to engage in comparisons between China and Europe, identifying the feudalism of the Middle Ages with the state system of the Zhou dynasty (pp. 18-19). Why does the author not bring his vast knowledge of Western antiquity fully to bear on his discussions of Eastern antiquity?

Is Rudi Thomsen then right in regarding Wang Mang (during his ambitious phase) as a hypocrite? This question seems to assume that in Confucianism means never justify ends, which is not the case. If Wang Mang's stubborn attempt to create the utopia elaborated by (some currents within) Confucianism is held to be

sincere, and if Wang Mang thus thought himself to be in possession of the cure-all to the problems besetting this world, could he not be a sincere Confucian even while machinating to obtain the power necessary to implement his plan? Didn't even the sages of Confucian lore compromise their moral integrity when noble dynastic ends justified doing so? Or, conversely, was Wang Mang not a hypocrite all along, building up his popularity by deftly assuming the attitudes of "Confucian humility" and seeking to maintain this popularity by giving the appearance of wishing to introduce a "Confucian" utopia while actually pursuing strongly centralizing policies for his own imperial ends? I do not wish by these questions to suggest any answer to the problem Rudi Thomsen has set himself, only to point out that Rudi Thomsen's analysis of Wang Mang does not solve them.

Wang Mang is known for his sweeping administrative and economic reforms. Without stating explicitly the grounds on which he passes judgment, Rudi Thomsen rightly corrects several of Bielenstein's attempts to defend Wang Mang as a statesman, attempts that often appear far-fetched. Rudi Thomsen argues that as a statesman Wang Mang was a total failure.

In conclusion, *Ambition and Confucianism* should only be read by those interested in the issue of evaluating Wang Mang as a moral being and as a statesman - those intent on deepening their historical knowledge of Wang Mang and his time are offered little not readily accessible elsewhere.

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