

Mainland Southeast Asia: towards a new theoretical approach

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Higham's paper calls for a consensus on the chronology of the Neolithic through to the Bronze period in mainland Southeast Asia (MSEA), articulating a series of questions relating to human mobility, subsistence and socio-cultural organisation within this timeframe. Having worked in Vietnam for 20 years, and being very familiar with the 'Vietnamese' Neolithic, I must admit to having paid little attention to the so-called LCM (long chronology); this is because the chronology suggested by its (limited number of) proponents is simply inconsistent with what is known of the development of the Neolithic in Vietnam and the later emergence of bronze technology. In terms of the broader chronology of MSEA, my colleagues and I (e.g. Oxenham *et al.* 2015) have stressed the observation of a virtual eruption of Neolithic sites across the region *c.* 4000 BP, overlapping with the terminal phase of the southern Chinese Neolithic, which no doubt fuelled (in terms of genes and technology) the major transformations observed among its more southerly neighbours.

The timing of the emergence of bronze technology in MSEA is perhaps not as straightforward as the timing of the Neolithic. While Higham's recent work on the chronology of the bronze period in Thailand is exemplary, we have not seen a similar concentrated effort to AMS date the emergence of bronze working in northern Vietnam. How, for instance, do we interpret the unique Man Bac ceramic vessel from grave 28 (Nguyen *et al.* 2011, photograph M28(1): 174) that very closely resembles the late Shang Dynasty bronze drum described in Kelleher (1980: 123)? Minimally, it indicates early Vietnamese Neolithic interaction with early Chinese bronze-working cultures before the emergence of bronze in the rest of MSEA. Clarification of the bronze chronology in Vietnam will be crucial to an understanding of the processes and mechanisms driving the development of bronze technology within one of the major corridors between north-east and Southeast Asia.

Higham raises more crucially important questions than I have space to address here. In my opinion, however, the issues of mobility (particularly in the context of the emergence of the Neolithic), forager (indigene)-farmer interactions, subsistence and social organisation should be the chief drivers of MSEA research programmes for the next decade or two. Recent work integrating archaeology with bio-distance data has focused our understanding of MSEA mobility and the emergence of the Neolithic (Matsumura & Oxenham 2014; Matsumura *et al.* 2015). Notwithstanding, much more work is needed to sketch out the main migratory routes and identify the pattern and timing of human movement during the mid to late Holocene.

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In terms of interactions, MSEA has been populated by modern humans for at least 50 000 years and high-density, pottery-using, pre-Neolithic forager communities covered much of Northern Vietnam and southern China from at least 7000 years ago. Such communities more than likely interacted with expanding farming communities in central China for millennia (Oxenham & Buckley, in press A), only losing their genetic and socio-cultural identities with the significant demographic expansion of Neolithic communities in China, and then Northern Vietnam somewhat later. Man Bac is a smoking gun inasmuch as both genetic assimilation and subsistence skill (hunting and farming) exchange between indigenes and migrants is clear in the archaeological record (Oxenham & Matsumura 2011). Man Bac is only one site, however: is there similar evidence in the rest of Neolithic MSEA?

Recent insights into subsistence at several Vietnamese Neolithic cemetery sites (e.g. Man Bac, An Son, Rach Nui) and the economic strategies at sites such as Neolithic Khok Phanom Di and the early phases of Ban Non Wat indicate quite distinctly that food security was contingent on local ecologies and cultural experiences: there was no standard Neolithic response to subsistence in MSEA. Moreover, “while there was clearly a Neolithic revolution, we would argue that domesticated crops and animals played a minor dietary role in the economies of these Neolithic communities” (Oxenham & Buckley, in press B). This, I would suggest, is perhaps a topic very worthy of further research and debate.

Finally, the question of social organisation (heterarchy *vs* elite-driven social order) is pivotal to our understanding of both Neolithic and Bronze period social organisation and dynamics. There are, however, problems with the current emphasis on heterarchical *vs* hierarchical in discussions of ancient MSEA society, except perhaps in the context of local-level palaeopolitics. The mosaic state of social organisation in the Neolithic is apparent from sites such as Man Bac and Khok Phanom Di, while the same can be said for Bronze Age sites in Thailand (e.g. ostensibly grave-good poor Non Nok Tha compared with materially rich Ban Non Wat). As with subsistence contingency, a range of social organising principles and mechanisms probably moulded Neolithic and Bronze period community political and social organisation. MSEA mortuary archaeology has been very much focused on socio-political organisation, with very little attention paid to other aspects of human behaviour expressed in the funerary record (for a couple of exceptions see Bacus 2006; Oxenham *et al.* 2008). Lest we forget, individuals and communities did not always find it necessary, or important, to express community level aspects of social and political order in their funerary rituals and grave offerings. We really do need to move away from our current simplistic and restrictive models of mobility, subsistence and socio-cultural organisation, and address these issues with fresh eyes, new theoretical approaches and less redundant baggage.

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