

GIDEON SHELACH-LAVI:

*The Archaeology of Early China: From Prehistory to the Han Dynasty.* xviii, 373 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. \$39.99.

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Readers interested in early China suddenly have a surfeit of choice readings. Shelach-Lavi's volume succeeds L. Liu and X. Chen's *The Archaeology of Ancient China* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012 – a sequel to K.C. Chang's editions of the same title) and is followed by G.L. Barnes' new edition *Archaeology of East Asia* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2015). Shelach-Lavi's work covers more time periods than Liu and Chen, but the latter contains more data; both the regional scope and time-span are greater in Barnes. These three new works are complementary, and together they bring the field of East Asian archaeology up to date with new discoveries, new analytical technologies, and new theoretical orientations.

Shelach-Lavi's chapters are ordered chronologically (Palaeolithic through the Early [Western] Han Dynasty), with the Neolithic divided into Early and Late (no Middle). Extra chapters examine food production (theoretically asking "What is agriculture?") and survey regional Bronze Age cultures. Most chapters begin with descriptions of individual archaeological sites and artefacts, finishing with a discussion. The former assume familiarity with archaeological terminology, while the latter presents major (theoretical) issues arising and provides some context for the finds. An introductory chapter dealing with geography and climate is perhaps weakest: the maps are insufficient – most geographic features named in the text are not on the maps, leaving the unacquainted reader adrift (see Figure 1). Illustrations of modern climate data are hard to decipher, and a quick overview of climate change since 20,000 years ago is thought to suffice.

The stated theoretical structure focuses on interaction – of peoples and objects across space and time – "as a catalyst of social change and cultural development" (p. 3). Shelach-Lavi's objective is to assess how the formation of "Chinese culture", as we know it historically, was an endeavour involving many peoples, ideas, and customs across the area of modern China (and beyond) rather than an innate property of an elite class. The term "China proper" (p. 9) is employed for the Wei/lower Yellow River and the middle-to-lower Yangzi River in central eastern China to indicate the area in which Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures co-evolved and formed the basis of later "Chinese culture".

Little interaction in the Early Neolithic (chs. 3–5) is observed except for the development of regional styles (p. 101) or "cultural packages" (p. 123). Shelach-Lavi suggests that societies across northern China were more group-oriented than those in the Yangzi River valley and eastern coast – as expressed in community ritual structures (p. 123). In the Late Neolithic, population increase is evidenced through increasing site numbers, size and site clustering into hierarchical units, forming regional cultures. Additions to the settlement pattern in Late Neolithic are walled sites (widely spread geographically) and public buildings (few). Inter-regional interaction was both direct and sporadic (identified by the spread of certain ceramic forms, jades and other elite objects, and earth-

pounding technology). Evidence for warfare is ambiguously present and not emphasized.

An important topic is the development of social complexity. Shelach-Lavi identifies two dimensions: horizontal, as in economic (craft) specializations and sub-groups based on kinship, age and gender, etc.; and vertical, as in hierarchies of wealth and power, encapsulated in the term “stratification”. Horizontal differentiation appears prior to 4500 BCE (ch. 5), but political hierarchy (ch. 6) appears in the Late Neolithic (from 4500–3300 BCE). Late Neolithic is treated as the formative period of “Chinese culture”, and chapter 6 ends with an intriguing discussion of “discontinuous cultural transmission” that allowed many Late Neolithic objects and practices to be absorbed into Classical Chinese culture.

Two conundrums (ch. 7) are: the decline of Late Neolithic complexity, and the formation of the state. Shelach-Lavi acknowledges sea level rise as causing the decline of societies on the east coast, but notes that other regions suffered no decline. The Erlitou culture of the early second millennium BCE is often identified as the earliest state, but Shelach-Lavi’s analysis demonstrates its failure on several criteria. He concludes that Erlitou is similar to other surrounding Late Neolithic sites/cultures and instead names Erligang culture (Early Shang) as the more likely earliest state.

Shang oracle bone script, ancestral communication, the “world of the gods”, and public worship make Shang “the first clearly ‘Chinese’ culture” (ch. 8, p. 226). Non-Shang Bronze Age cultures (ch. 9) are divided into north, central, and south/south-west. Among Bronze Age state-level polities (including Shang), interactions homogenized material cultures but sharpened “unique local beliefs and rituals” (p. 256). Possible connections between the Wei/Yellow River region and Sichuan Basin are intriguing. Commentary in ch. 9 concludes that the north did not switch rapidly from agriculture to pastoralism but constituted a mosaic of self-sufficient agro-pastoral communities with varying emphases on farming, herding, hunting and pig-raising. Shelach-Lavi dismisses mass migration across the steppes in the late second millennium BCE as shaping Chinese civilization but acknowledges adoption of new technology and crafts (in chariotry and weaponry).

Chapter 10 begins with a potted Zhou history, and then describes archaeological remains and new crafts (iron technology and lost-wax bronze casting, inlay and lacquer). Two ideological revolutions were the late Western Zhou ritual reform, which began Zhou “globalization”, and development of market economies and coinage. Efforts to define different Zhou state cultures belie “increased cultural convergence” (p. 300). Chapter 11 reviews establishment of the Qin and Han empires and then discusses and interprets unification material: roads, Shihuangdi’s tomb, standardized measures, and coinage. Final comments explore tension between unity and diversity, both ancient and modern.

One question Shelach-Lavi uses in several chapters is “Are we there yet?”, asked of domestication, historicism and state formation. This tells us that there are issues with definition, problems with time scales, and identification of attributes. Thus, as much new information that this volume offers in an easily digestible form, we must still look to the future to resolve many outstanding questions. Despite poor B&W photo reproduction and scattered spelling mistakes, this volume is a valuable addition to Chinese archaeology and world civilization literature.

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