

REVIEW: THREE PERSPECTIVES ON THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANCIENT CHINA

Li Liu and Xingcan Chen. *The Archaeology of China from the Late Paleolithic to the Early Iron Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Rowan Flad and Pochan Chen. *Ancient Central China, Centers and Peripheries along the Yangzi River*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Gideon Shelach-Lavi. *The Archaeology of Early China, from Prehistory to the Han Dynasty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015.

Reviewed by
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Cambridge University Press has been generous to Chinese archaeology in the last few years, with this trio of excellent books on the archaeology of China. This reflects growth in western participants in the archaeology of China, many new excavations and surveys, and widespread interest in the topic of ancient China. In this review I compare and discuss three recent books about the archaeology of ancient China.

We who research the archaeology of China are extraordinarily lucky to have these three thoughtful and challenging volumes to consult as guides through the vast number of archaeological discoveries that have been made in China in recent years. But more than merely presenting the data, each book provides as well a particular standpoint on interpretations of the past, each view carefully delineated and supported by rich data. Another commonality is that each book acknowledges a profound debt to Professor K. C. Chang, who pioneered the archaeology of China for English-reading archaeologists, and to whom we archaeologists are all grateful for his leadership in the field. Another important commonality among the authors of each volume is the grounding of the books in archaeological surveys that each of the authors organized and participated in: Liu and Chen in the survey of the Luo River, a tributary of the Yellow River; Flad and Chen in the Szechuan basin; and Shelach-Lavi in Liaoning Province and Inner Mongolia. The insights

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from these intensive survey experiences color and amplify the archaeology of regions of China with which they are intimately familiar. In particular, the usages of the words “center” and “periphery” take on different meanings among the three volumes, to be noted as they arise and addressed again in the conclusion.

Each of these books is instructive in pioneering different ways of organizing archaeological material while presenting much of the same data from different theoretical perspectives. Each is necessarily selective in choosing which of the vast array of archaeological sites to describe and discuss at length. Although some overlap occurs in the sites discussed, the quantity of sites described in these three books makes it impossible to summarize or compare them site by site. In any case, it is the theoretical perspective selected by the authors which has affected their choices from among many sites, and their differing emphases, which provide the most important facets of these volumes for students of Chinese archaeology.

I begin this review with thumbnail descriptions of the contents of each book, before facing the challenging task of comparison.

The Archaeology of China, from the Late Paleolithic to the Early Bronze Age
by Li Liu and Xingcan Chen

Li Liu and Xingcan Chen follow the precedent of inclusiveness set by Professor K. C. Chang in his four editions of *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, and in doing so they have produced a comprehensive book on the archaeology of Ancient China, incorporating many new discoveries into the narrative that essentially details the emergence of the state in China. The authors follow Chang’s lead in taking a perspective from the political center of early China, in which the Yellow River region represents the quintessential China, with the early states of Xia, Shang, and Zhou having developed as the political and cultural core of China according to the written record. Following in K. C. Chang’s gigantic footsteps, they continue his work on the beginnings of agriculture throughout China and the rise of states along the Yellow River. While multiregional development is acknowledged and described, Liu and Chen more closely follow the model of setting forth the archaeology in chronological order and political developmental stages, explaining the archaeological discoveries organized by cultures as defined by pottery, and emphasizing stages of human socio-political development more than regions.

After setting the stage with chapters on the history of Chinese archaeology, the politics of Chinese archaeology, and the environment and ecology of China, the authors present relevant archaeological data in

terms of the development of increasingly complex societies. Their chapters are entitled Foragers and Collectors, Domestication of Plants and Animals, Sedentism and Food Production, Early Complex Societies, Early States in the Central Plain, Bronze Cultures of the Northern Frontiers, Late Shang and Its Neighbors, and finally, Chinese Civilization in Comparative Perspective. The archaeological narrative essentially ends with the Late Shang, omitting the archaeology of Zhou and later periods.

Liu and Chen explain Chinese archaeology as having been largely concerned with space-time systematics, in order to construct the history of China. The focus has been on the formation of the state, a history that can be compared with other pristine states in world history. The current emphasis in Chinese archaeology, Liu and Chen explain, is on mutual influence among diverse ethnic groups. Along the same lines, the multi-ethnic nature of the people within China's current borders has led to attempts to consider the archaeology of all regions of China to be the remains of those who contributed to the construction of both ancient China and current China. Citing the seminal work of Su Bingqi, Liu and Chen explain that mutual influence among diverse ethnic groups was important. However, groups named in historic documents other than Xia and Shang are rarely mentioned. Ethnicity itself is not a theme, although sites and regions outside the Yellow River are discussed.

In the chapter on environment and ecology, cultural adaptation to the environment is emphasized. Topics in this section include River Systems, Ecological Divisions, Paleoclimate and Human Adaptations, including variable monsoons, the shifting levels of riverbeds and sea levels, and how such changing environments might have affected early populations. Within each section archaeological sites are described by region.

The archaeology of human populations begins with the Pleistocene–Holocene transition. Sites containing microliths, which are widespread in northern East Asia, and have been the focus of many studies, are described and discussed in the context of the need for hunter-gatherers to be flexible when faced with the changing environments.

Excavations in the last few decades have demonstrated that pottery occurs in archaeological sites before the onset of plant domestication in East Asia. Although this phenomenon has long been known in Japan, the discovery of early Holocene pottery in China and the Russian Far East has been a surprise. Now it is well understood that pottery occurs before domestication in East Asia from Japan to the Russian Far East. While the label Neolithic is often used for the first pottery, that term is not used in this book, reserving it for the time

when plants and animals were domesticated. Indeed, the discovery in China and the Russian Far East of very early pottery without evidence of domestication has called the attention of world archaeology to this region.

But even the domestication of plants and animals in China is a topic to which a great deal of new and surprising information has been added in recent years. Millets and soybeans seem to appear earliest in north China, with wheat, barley, and oats as later additions, introduced from the west, while rice was first domesticated in swampy lands to the south.

The following three chapters concern the emergence of social inequality in the Neolithic, the rise and fall of complex societies in various Neolithic sites, and the formation of states in the Central Plain. The growth of urbanization has proven to be a much more widely spread phenomenon than was thought earlier, with walled sites appearing in many regions of China. As social and political complexity began to develop, it often failed, as shown by the rise and fall of small polities. This phenomenon was not restricted to Yangshao in the west and Longshan in the east, as was once thought, but occurs in many regions of China.

Before presenting the archaeology of Late Shang, the authors shift back to the Early Bronze Age, especially in the northern frontier area. Sites on all sides of the Yellow River were playing a part in the making of the Chinese polity. Thus the scene is set for a chapter on the Late Shang florescence, during which numerous non-Shang peoples had to be confronted by the Shang polity defending their region on all sides. The particular question of boundaries of the Late Shang is addressed with both documentary and archaeological evidence. This book places China squarely in the context of world archaeology, and continues to raise questions about the rise and fall of complex societies.

Ancient Central China by Rowan Flad and Pochan Chen

The perspective offered on ancient China by Rowan Flad and Pochan Chen focuses on "Central China," as declared in the title, a characteristic that makes this book stand out from the other two books described in this review. Flad and Chen declare that they are more concerned with peripheries than the center, and the periphery selected for this book is the long Yangzi River basin from 3000 to 1000 B.C.E. Thus the archaeology discussed is circumscribed in both time and space.

Basing the use of the word "Central" in their title on the fact that the Yangzi River is nearer to the geographical center of current China than is

the Yellow River, often called central China, the authors emphasize that their area of interest is somewhat peripheral to the narrative about the origin of the state, but important nevertheless in its impact on the development of states. They study this region as it vacillated between being closely related to the Yellow River center but having a more peripheral contribution. The emphasis on the Yangzi River basin shifts the fulcrum of ancient China to a region that may have been peripheral in the written history of China, but was not without effects on the development of the Chinese state.

Flad and Chen frame Chinese archaeology in terms of landscapes, especially the differing topographies of landscapes. In their words, topographies are “the geographically contextualized totality of interactions between humans and the environment in which they live and among humans within this environment.” (p. 1). Some of the concepts that come to the fore with this shift in perspective include explorations of borderlands, topographies, and identities. The authors describe peripheries as having been powerful at times without becoming central, thus decentralizing the notion of power, and as possible critical nodes in production and/or trade. The shift in emphasis away from the Yellow River into the Yangzi valley produces new insights into interpreting the archaeological sites of the region, and interrogates the very idea of center and periphery.

After a chapter on the physical environment of the Yangzi basin, the history of archaeological research in Central China is described. The authors explain the relative paucity of archaeological activity in this region as due to the fact that few ancient Chinese texts include this region, and that it has only once, and briefly at that, been the power center of China when the government was in Chongqing in recent history. Because the times were turbulent it was not conducive to archaeological research. However, they point to recent changes in the regional situation, including the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, which has stimulated considerably more research in the region.

Part II, *Political and Cultural Topographies*, is divided into three regions in which the archaeological evidence is described from the middle third to the late first millennia B.C.E. The Sichuan Basin and the Middle Yangzi regions were each the homeland of a politically complex group noted in the histories. The Three Gorges, in contrast, were politically peripheral in spite of involvement in long-distance trade important to centers on the Yellow River.

To begin the discussion of their chosen peripheral area, Flad and Chen explain their approach to political and cultural topographies. Political topographies can be recognized by archaeological features such as palaces, other evidence of hierarchies, and the distribution of sites.

Cultural topographies are “shorthand for the spatial patterning of shared material culture (particularly ceramic inventories) across a region.” (p. 68). Furthermore, they explain, “Our belief is that regional patterns in the distribution of similar suites of material culture meaningfully (although incompletely) reflect shared traditions of shared practice and symbolic behavior ...” (p. 69).

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, the history and archaeology of three key regions are described and discussed. The Chengdu Plain has been considered in Chinese history as the homeland of a people known as Shu. In spite of this historicity, Flad and Chen explain that the historic record is so incomplete it is difficult to pin down geographically. The archaeology, on the other hand, is specifically located without being clearly related to the Shu or any historic group. Both are needed to understand the past.

The polity called Chu likewise is known from Chinese ancient writings, but the documents are also indefinite as to the precise location of its center. Another group called Ba is still more elusive as to its place on the ground and its relationship to archaeological sites. Flad and Chen point out how fraught with problems it is to attach archaeological sites to these historic entities. Each region is therefore described, one chapter at a time, by its archaeological discoveries.

Focusing first on the Sichuan Basin, the Chengdu Plain is described according to its political and cultural topographies. The authors recount in detail the historical accounts of the Shu, and later polities in the basin, which imply strong polities in the region. They then turn to archaeology for its independent perspective. The political topography, as shown by archaeological cultures from the third millennium to the mid-first millennium B.C.E., is demonstrated by walled towns, for example those of the Baodun culture, which has the largest walled Neolithic area in China. In the Bronze Age, definitive sites such as Sanxingdui can be seen to have controlled resources, as shown by the ceremonial pits, which have impressed the scholarly world with their unprecedented Bronze Age sculptures and other artifacts. The Shi'erqiao culture, which may have overlapped Sanxingdui, shows changes in the relationships of peoples in the Basin. The site of Jinsha is particularly notable for ritual activities including pits full of prestigious artifacts and stone figures of bound captives.

The Middle Yangzi, where the Chu state was located, is the subject of chapter 5. Chu, historically attested from about 790 to 223 B.C.E., was an urbanized state directly related to the Central Plains. Archaeological discoveries are abundant, with several described in detail.

The Neolithic sites show that some of the earliest pottery-using agricultural settlements in China were found in this region. Later sites such

as Panlongchen show connections between this region and the Yellow River region during the Shang era along the Yellow River. Chapter 6 considers the Ba region and the Three Gorges, where oracle bones were found, which connect the region with the Shang. These sites are also described through time and developmental periods providing the data for discussions in Part III.

Part III uses the archaeological data previously described to consider the topographies of economic and ritual activities, demonstrating that important changes in both the economy and ritual were occurring along the Yangzi River. These foci are important ways to conceptualize different kinds of changes through time. Chapter 7 discusses economic topographies, including production and exchange, with an emphasis on salt.

The topography of rituals in chapter 8 covers burials in particular, but also other evidence of rituals and sacrifices, such as pits. It includes a discussion of the relationship between rituals and social identity, which confronts an important question in the archaeology of China. Burials are the primary data for such discussions, and the burial data for the region is described chronologically. The rich data of Chinese archaeology in this region has led into the important questioning of identities and why they form.

Ba and Chu identities become the focus of considering social identities of these sites, with a lucid discussion of diasporas, a topic which is rarely approached with archaeological data. The conclusion uses the trope of landscape to return the discussion to centers and peripheries. This short discussion is a must-read for its clear delineation of the way landscapes and topographies help to sort out important issues in understanding the past.

The Archaeology of China, from Prehistory to the Han Dynasty,
by Gideon Shelach-Lavi

Covering the archaeology of China from Paleolithic inhabitants to the unification of China under the Qin and Han dynasties, this volume provides a vast array of archaeological data making all of China the subject matter, rather than selecting either a region or a topic to emphasize. Exploring the peripheries of China intensively, he introduces the reader to a vast array of archaeological sites.

The theoretical issues of identity and interaction guide this exploration of archaeology in China. The author is clear not only about which issues he has chosen to highlight, but also what kind of data are the most pertinent to approach those questions. He is particularly interested in "the development of local sociopolitical and cultural

trajectories and on evidence for interregional interactions and the creation of shared cultural norms." (p. 3). His focus is anthropological as well as historical, especially during the Bronze Age, in which the weight of power demonstrated in bronzes became distributed in all directions from the Yellow River, in particular to the north and west.

Shelach-Lavi pays special attention to the formation of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites, for these are the eras when local identities formed and changed. Interregional interactions of other kinds are also emphasized. Thus both the local and the broad understanding of societies and their interactions are central to this book.

In it, the author looks beyond the Shang dynasty to subsequent events in the formation of China. The narrative line is organized along the traditional prehistoric stages of early human culture, followed by the transition to food production (differences between north and south China are emphasized in separate chapters), and carrying through to the emergence of sociopolitical complexity. The enormous volume of new discoveries throughout present-day China allows a closer examination of many "peripheries" than has previously been possible and a sense of the methods by which the Zhou dynasty grew at the expense of surrounding polities.

The titles of the chapters in this book are similar to those of the Liu and Chen volume, yet there is a distinct shift in emphasis, away from the Xia-Shang-Zhou narrative toward the peripheries, especially toward the northern and western regions and their interactions with and contributions to the creation of central power. By considering the [presumably] non-Chinese groups in surrounding regions, and shining light on their varying reactions to and interactions with Shang and Zhou, Shelach-Lavi enlarges and intensifies the central Chinese perspective. The chapters describing the various Bronze Age societies within what is now China are a particularly important contribution to understanding the origins of states in China. It is this emphasis that gives the book a fresh perspective on the usual topic of state formation in China.

While Shelach-Lavi describes the rise of the Shang state, he perceives in China's socio-political organization important innovations with the advent of the Zhou dynasty. He focuses on "the development of local sociopolitical and cultural trajectories and the formation of local identities on the one hand, and on evidence for interregional interactions on the other." (p. 1). Describing the formation of local identities as responses to attempts of the Zhou state to expand into new regions is an intriguing perspective. This emphasis makes the Warring States period comprehensible from the point of view of the peripheries, requiring a larger viewshed than merely that of the Zhou, and moving the

frame of vision farther back in time and place, to include the intentions and identities of the entities that did not become states, those referred to in Chinese histories as “barbarians.”

His continuing the narrative of history and archaeology into the Qin and Han periods further helps the reader understand the totality of China, also providing a platform for understanding the states to the East (such as those formed on the Korean peninsula, which he does not discuss) and to the south, both regions stimulated to more complex organization by the reach of the Han dynasty.

Shelach-Lavi’s emphasis on identity allows him to discuss the archaeological sites from a perspective that illuminates the “peripheral” peoples in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, as well as those on the southern and western peripheries, from a new angle. The main themes of the book, noted above: economic adaptation, social trajectory, cultural change, the formation of local identities, and interaction between different regions of China all serve to sharpen the focus on the peripheries.

In each chapter Shelach-Lavi presents the archaeological data before discussing interpretations. A theoretical discussion on the meanings of artifactual similarities frames his point of view, quite similar to that articulated by Flad and Chen. The similarities, seen in artifacts, often pottery, may be caused by movements of people or movement of artifacts, or even movements of technology. He sees the transmission of ideas and other information as “the outcome of these mechanisms rather than an independent mechanism.” (p. 4). He then discusses different scales and types of migration, the movement of various sizes of groups of people, and the various causes of such population movements. When perceiving artifacts as being moved separate from people, he invokes trade and the various ways that new objects can impact a culture. These are themes not so directly discussed by the other books.

In addition, the author looks at interregional interactions in a political context, and contrasts peer-polity interaction with world-systems theory. But in the long run, Shelach-Lavi explains that he “avoids this historical method as much as possible” and focuses “on the archaeological data and what they can tell us about ancient interregional contact” (p. 6).

Conclusion

Each book is a mine of information, much of it new, but each one represents much more than that. The volumes explore fresh perspectives with rigor and insight.

Scholars of ancient China will probably want to have all three books in their personal libraries, even though there is some overlap in the archaeological data presented. The differing perspectives of the three books illuminate these data, but the spotlight shines differently depending on the theoretical perspective of the authors. Although they represent alternative ways to approach ancient China, they are all focused on archaeological data, and require archaeological explanations of the data.

I find it heartening that groups of people have become the subject of archaeology in these books, rather than abstractions. Pottery styles are called “cultures” in Chinese and, perhaps under the influence of the word *wenhua*, cultures are treated as meaningful entities beyond space-time systematics. It is good to see that the notion of migration of groups of people can now be addressed, as Flad and Chen discuss diasporas, and Shelach-Lavi discusses migrations. Liu and Chen emphasize the multiregional perspective. These are topics that have been too long neglected by archaeologists.

Finally, from my own perspective, I was delighted to discover that neither “chiefdom” nor “chief” is in the index of any of these books. The tired notion of the stages of political evolution seems to have run its course, or perhaps the new emphases better fit the Chinese data. Each of these volumes pushes the archaeology of China in important new directions.