Review article
Ancient China reconsidered

Magnus Fiskesjö*

Katheryn M. Linduff, Yan Sun, Wei Cao & Yuanqing Liu. 2018. *Ancient China and its Eurasian neighbors: artifacts, identity, and death in the frontier, 3000–700 BCE*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-108-41861-4 £85.

Roderick Campbell. 2018. *Violence, kinship and the early Chinese state: the Shang and their world*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-107-19761-9 £75.

Xiaolong Wu. 2017. *Material culture, power, and identity in ancient China*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-107-13402-7 £85.



These three ambitious, successful and highly rewarding books help us to rethink the archaeology of ancient China and its context. The work co-authored by Linduff, Sun, Cao and Liu is the most wide-ranging. It offers an overview of ancient Chinese interactions with Central Asian neighbours over more than two millennia, from the first beginnings of metal use up to the Iron Age. It also aims to change the narrative of this region by re-interpreting the 'Inner Asian frontier' as a multi-centred, dynamic, diverse and changing 'contact zone' unlike the uniform barbarian steppe set apart from incipient Chinese civilization that an earlier literature tended to imagine. The authors focus on distinct yet overlapping aspects of life and interaction on this frontier—'technoscapes', 'individualscapes', 'lineagescapes', 'regionscapes'—departing from the Sinocentric view where the only interesting questions about ancient frontier peoples were how the barbarians contributed (or not), to the making of the (glory of the) Sino-centres. The recent exciting debates over the Shimao "city too far north" (Jaang *et al.* 2018) come to mind!

Linduff *et al.* want the archaeologically discovered objects to 'drive' their research into what was done with them in their social context, as opposed to staying with the objects and the messages built into each piece (as is often the case in 'Classical' or mainstream Chinese archaeology and art-history). They discuss how all objects and cultural models circulating in the 'contact zone' were used and manipulated for local social purposes. For example, steppe people used Chinese-styled artefacts, but did not adopt Chinese burial programmes until they were actually colonised—an important observation paralleling the work by Alice Yao (2016) on the Chinese sphere's south-western frontier.

Similar intriguing insights are brought out regarding the wide-ranging metal 'technoscape' experimentation in the contact zone, which preceded and overlapped with later Chinese-styled obsessions with ritual bronzes. Such experimentation also engaged creative individuals personally, not just on the level of shared culture sets. The creative adoption of metal adornments and tool styles as set cultural identity markers is also explored in nuanced detail, as are the uses of (Chinese-inspired) inscribed genealogies taken up by locals as another form of independent self-identification. Both of these contribute to the formation by local elites of secondary states that mimic Chinese forms and integrate into competitive Chinese-sphere exchange and prestige networks (Chapter 4). Such 'self-colonization' (Etkind 2011) can also be thought of as happening inside the Chinese-sphere itself!

The work of Campbell, an archaeologist and anthropologist, is squarely focused on the Bronze Age Shang state, which came to an end in *c.* 1050 BC. This multi-disciplinary book seeks "to combine oracle-bones [inscriptions], an abandoned eleventh-century (BC) city [archaeology], and Bourdieu" (p.

* *Department of Anthropology, McGraw Hall 201, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA (Email: nf42@cornell.edu)*

© Antiquity Publications Ltd, 2018
antiquity 92 366 (2018): 1671–1673 https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.235

https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.235 Published online by Cambridge University Press

xix)—the latter refers to engagement with social theory in general, arguing that our research should try to generate new ways of looking at the past. The theoretical intervention here lies in challenging reigning assumptions about the Shang, which Campbell feels draw too much on modern impulses. His approach, by contrast, attempts a 'suspension of disbelief' before Shang practices so as to re-assemble a Shang world as it may have seemed to its people, who really in many ways were like ourselves (see Schmidt 2017). It is a productive attempt, and more explicitly theorised than Keightley (2000), who also attempted something similar.

The book also includes (in Chapter 2) one of the best discussions of how the Shang world fits (or does not) with various global-archaeological models for cities, states and civilizations. At the same time, the book forms one of the best-available, up-to-date overviews of this early kingdom. It traces the origins of the Shang from the Early Bronze Age forebears that also figure in Linduff *et al.*, yet focuses much less on what goes on in the contact zones of its peripheries —except in terms of how they supplied natural resources, networks of minor allies and so on, and acted as hunting grounds, including for human captives delivered into the Shang core. The full-blown Shang hierarchical polity and its dynamics is the main target of the book. Campbell's account of the making of this polity emphasises the history of the social harnessing of violence, in war but especially in the sacrifice of animals as well as people. He traces this history from various angles, including through highly interesting discussions of the selective use of weapons (in burials) as evidence of war and violence, both before and during the period of the Shang state.

These accounts are then used for an extended analysis of how authority and power were organised in the Shang, especially how sacrifice became the key arena and practice in which Shang people negotiated their place in the core society. The contest for social status was a maelstrom of violence, dominated by the king through his orgies of sacrificial expenditure, which ostensibly negotiated his relations with key ancestors —although apparently not, Campbell notes, with the supreme god 'Di' who ruled over the weather, rain and so on. If so, then Shang kings seem not to have reached for the famous later (Zhou) fiction of the king as the direct descendant of heaven (*pace* pp. 146–53; see also Friedman's (1998) argument about the ruse where the king is presented as a supreme god's earthly kin, and by force of this, as their representative to ordinary mortals).

A lot turns on our understanding of this issue; meanwhile, we can see the Shang king as a king in the making, a *primus inter pares* surrounded by aristocrats and allies. Campbell's discussions of the Shang as a 'lineage polity' where such men joined the king (and may even have competed for the useful privilege to join the king), in war, sacrifice and more, and also on how these dynamics are reflected in the graveyard designs at the capital city, are most rewarding. They make it possible to begin to imagine what it could have been like to participate in this civilization made through violence: to help discursively reproduce it, act it out and support it through "networks of capital" (p. 122) and resources. It should be noted that, partially for lack of evidence, the role of mining resources and their control in a society obsessed with the production of bronze vessels, weapons and other tools is not much discussed here.

The book by Xiaolong Wu falls at the tail end of the time sequence here, offering an in-depth study of a small, northern secondary state, during the so-called 'Warring States' period (fifth to third centuries BC). The state was called Zhongshan, and can be considered a distinct example of local, originally non-Chinese, elites taking up a Sinicised identity and existence, as discussed in Linduff *et al.* Indeed, the state-bearing elite of Zhongshan were identified by many Chinese ancient writers as descendants of former barbarians of the north. Yet the state survived and managed to hang on for centuries as one successful member of the international diplomatic system that had developed with the decay of the Classical era of the Zhou.

Like its competition, Zhongshan was already firmly located in the Iron Age, with advanced and large-scale iron production, including weapons (iron transformed warfare, and contributed to the irrevocable demise of the old order). Yet at the same time, as Wu discusses, this state was still obsessed with the bronzes that had been the focal point of most Chinese-sphere polities during the long Bronze Age, the traditions and ideals of which still lingered.

Indeed, in order to engage in the Warring States era of competitive state relations, the Zhongshan made and used bronze for ritual vessels, ornaments, coins and weapons. The focus of Wu's book is to trace such elite and luxury artefacts, and their use in fashioning, showcasing and legitimising Zhongshan elite

© Antiquity Publications Ltd, 2018

https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.235 Published online by Cambridge University Press

identities. Wu also argues that such objects were themselves social agents in their own right. I am doubtful of the usefulness of framing things this way (although I would accept that contemporaneous people could imagine that such objects possessed an agency of their own). Regardless, as Wu's book admirably traces these objects and their social life, it might itself serve as an occasion for debating these issues!

Wu shows how the Zhongshan created mixed burial programmes with elite horse-chariot burials meant to suggest a continuity with the ancients (the Shang and the Zhou). At the same time, they used sheep and cattle as if cultivating a link to northern pastoralist legacies. A lavish burial recently discovered from a powerful Zhongshan king showcases this unique arrangement, with distinct northern pastoralist grave goods figuring separately alongside Chinese-styled bronzes, jades and musical instruments in the same tomb. In a fascinating chapter (4), Wu argues that in 314 BC, soon after a significant victory against a state that much more plausibly could claim an older Chinese-sphere ancestry, the Zhongshan king set out to revolutionise the artistic style of his court, so as to emphasise his and his country's distinctiveness —even as he cast Classical bronze axes with inscriptions claiming that he had been granted his subordinate kingdom by the Zhou king himself (pp. 108–109). This is a striking case of identity-making in context! Building on all of this, a final chapter is devoted to a singular unique object, the famous bronze panel laying out the planned, ideal design of the king's entire mausoleum. The book as a whole is a virtuoso description of a most curious self-made world. It is an account that should provoke much thought and discussion about identities in general and in archaeology in particular.

Although different in style and goals, all three books make deeply meaningful contributions towards understanding the earliest Chinese states. In theoretical terms, all deal with identity-making and the social dynamics of state formation, including the waxing, waning and even vanishing of the peoples and polities examined. If I could make just one suggestion, it is that world systems theory could help. I am thinking especially of the 'long view' versions developed in dialogue with archaeology but now seldom referred to, and especially the anthropological versions that examine identity production, both as situated within the system cycles and itself as a factor affecting these same cycles. They can help us show and explain how one thing leads to another, not just in terms of the dynamics of polities coming into being, but also their collapse and the consequences. They might also help us better isolate curious continuities such as the effect of Chinese writing, a lasting reference point, which, at least from Zhou times onwards, has caused many Chinese-sphere denizens to think that things stay the same even when they do change.

Finally, it is worth celebrating how all three books illustrate a new level of serious collaborative work being undertaken in Chinese archaeology. Each is the fruit of long-term fieldwork and research conducted between Western and Chinese scholars, including some Chinese scholars trained in the West, and mutually influencing each other. This happy situation has again become possible in China during the last few decades. We can only hope that the relative openness seen recently in China will continue, and that we will not witness a return to the climate of xenophobia and state-driven nationalism that influenced both politics and archaeology in the twentieth century.

References

Etkind, A. 2011. *Internal colonization: Russia's imperial experience*. Cambridge & Malden (MA): Polity.

Friedman, J. 1998. *System, structure and contradiction in the evolution of 'Asiatic' social formations* (2nd edition). Walnut Creek (CA): Altamira-Sage.

Jaang, L., Z. Sun, J. Shao & M. Li. 2018. When peripheries were centres: a preliminary study of the Shimao-centred polity in the loess highland, China. *Antiquity* 92: 1008–22. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.31

Keightley, D. 2000. *The ancestral landscape: time, space, and community in Late Shang China (ca. 1200–1045 B.C.)*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.

Schmidt, M. 2017. Godfrey Lienhardt as a skeptic; or, anthropology as conceptual puzzle-solving. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7: 351–75. https://doi.org/10.14318/hau7.2.031

Yao, A. 2016. *The ancient highlands of southwest China: from the Bronze Age to the Han Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199367344.001.0001

© Antiquity Publications Ltd, 2018

https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.235 Published online by Cambridge University Press