

Comment on Jaffe et al.: Shimao and the Rise of States in China: Archaeology, Historiography and Myth

by Anke Hein

Focusing on the recent re-evaluation and extensive archaeological work at the site of Shimao this article provides much food for thought on broader trends in the archaeology of China and beyond. The main point it makes is that research on Shimao – and much of Chinese archaeology – continues to contribute to a Central Plain-centric narrative, framing new finds nearly exclusively in terms of connections to the Central Plain rather than trying to understand these materials from localized frameworks. This problem is not new, nor is it limited to the case of Shimao. Despite increased regionalism in the organization of archaeological research and emphasis on local developmental trajectories since the late 1980s (Falkenhausen 1995), excavation reports and further studies alike continue to connect new finds with historical or mytho-historical accounts. The notion of a single origin of Chinese civilization may long have been replaced by the idea of a “Chinese Interactions Sphere”, a communication network between several regional cultures eventually forming a unified dynastic China while maintaining certain local idiosyncrasies (suggested independently by K.C. Chang 1986 and Su Bingqi 1983:225-234); however, the focus has remained on creating – or adding to – a linear narrative inexorably moving toward the emergence of a unified dynastic China. Regions outside this interaction sphere are either ignored or defined based on their relationship to that emerging “central” power and the written sources it came to produce.

In the 1990s and early 2000s it was hoped that the new discoveries and increased autonomy of archaeological work in areas outside the Central Plain might lead to “a more ‘pluralistic,’ even a more ‘democratic’” view of the past (Falkenhausen 1995:200), but this has not come to pass. The reasons are complex including the need for both institutions and individual researchers to obtain (mostly governmental) funding, gain general recognition and career advancement, and genuine preoccupation with understanding how Chinese civilization came to be. Additionally, especially when aiming to publish in high-ranking English-language venues, there is a certain pressure to frame archaeological interpretations within Anglo-American anthropological theories among which the linear narrative of cultural evolutionism seems to have been particularly readily taken up in the Chinese context.

Much of this applies both to scholars based in China and those abroad, though expectations and views differ slightly. For instance, looking at coverage on the Sanxingdui finds (both from the 1980s and from 2021), the foreign press has a tendency to talk of a “lost civilization”, emphasizing gold and mystery as well as independence of developments in the Central Plain (e.g. Holland and Wang 2021; Van Turenhout 2021). Chinese news sources focus on connections with the Shu mentioned in historical text and embed the discovery into the story of the emergence of Chinese civilization from many sources (*duoyuan yiti* 多元一体), thus furthering the political goal of fostering the perception of a culturally unified China (e.g. Chai and Guan 2021; Yang et al. 2021). Indeed, the gathering of archaeologists at Sanxingdui to inspect and discuss the new find was entitled “Zoujin Sanxingdui dudong Zhonghua wenming” 走进三星堆读懂中华文明 (i.e., “Understanding Chinese Civilization by approaching Sanxingdui”) (Guo 2021). Naturally, the scholarly literature is more nuanced, be it in Chinese or other languages. Still, when it comes to scholarly publications about Chinese archaeology, there is a tendency for English-language journals to readily accept on the sensational (including the origins of Chinese civilization) and relegate less grand discoveries or research in areas seen as marginal to the less prestigious “regional journals”. To be published in high-ranking journals there thus is a felt (and often all too real) need to subscribe to these broad narratives, especially as many journals will not provide enough space for more nuanced, complex understandings.

This may be part of the reason for the lack of “rigorous model-building” that this article on Shimao laments.

There is, however, another underlying issue that applies not only to China but also to archaeology in the anglophone world, and that is the focus on social complexity and the often insufficiently reflected use of terminology adopted from social evolutionist frameworks. While research on social organization and societal change are naturally core themes in archaeology, poorly thought-through usage of terminology with significant theoretical ramifications such as “complexity” or “state”, let alone “civilization”, are highly problematic. At the same time, especially scholars working in the Americas tend to avoid the term “civilization” due to its colonialist underpinnings. There seems to be little awareness of such issues in discussions on Chinese archaeology. This applies to most of the, seemingly endless, list of Chinese-language papers and books discussing “the origins of Chinese civilization”, be it from archaeological or historical perspectives.¹ A recent English-language summary of the archaeometric results of the Origins of Chinese Civilization Project by Yuan and Campbell (2009) initially asks what is meant by civilization and if there are one or several Chinese civilizations. These questions are then surprisingly dropped and the paper focuses on summarizing and praising the indeed impressive multi-disciplinary and multi-method work that unfortunately leaves issues of terminology and underlying theories unaddressed.

In general, there is a large amount of literature discussing fundamental issues of sociocultural evolutionism, especially in its earlier unilinear version and its ethnocentric, colonialist, and even racist undercurrents (see e.g. Daems 2021; Emberling 2015; Lyman and O’Brien 2008; Morris 2012). It is therefore quite surprising that “many (perhaps most) archaeologists simply take the concept [of cultural complexity] for granted”, as Morris (2012:520) points out, while others completely disregard it as imperialist, ethnocentric, and overall problematic (e.g. Joyce 2010; Shanks and Tilley 1987). Some, however, try to find a compromise. In the Chinese context, Campbell (2009) suggests focusing on networks and power relations rather than discussing if certain political structures did or did not qualify as states. Shelach and Jaffe (2014:332), while being critical of unilinear evolutionary models, argue that some neo-evolutionist categories such as state “underscore important factors in sociological arrangements” and are useful if used in a nuanced way. They point out that – if one wanted to use neo-evolutionary criteria for the identification of the state – Taosi and not Erlitou would be the earliest state in China. Now the same argument is made for Shimao, calling it the earliest state, while others again point to Liangzhu when discussing the origins of “Chinese civilization” (e.g. Han 2010). In these debates, the term “civilization” is largely used without proper definition or discussion of underlying theoretical concepts, even in this otherwise very carefully worded article on Shimao.

Starting with reflections on the term, in their recent book entitled “Civilisation recast”, Feuchtwang and Rowlands (2019) aim to counteract the Eurocentric bias and colonial baggage of debates on civilization. While they succeed in this by focusing on Africa and China rather than on the Greco-Roman world, their approach has a moral focus that easily – though unintentionally – lends support to ethnocentric narratives of nation-building. Indeed, they define civilization as furnishing “the moral ideals for people to live by and aspire to” as “self-fashioning by restraint and with reference to an encompassing sense of the world that also defines what is human and what humans do, what is perceptible by living human senses and what is not, distinguishing insides from outsides” (2019:182). Such an approach to civilization,

¹ For a short recent summary consult Dai 2020. For a summary of the results of the Origins of Chinese Civilization Project (Zhonghua wenming qiuyuan yu zaoqi fazhang zonghe yanjiu 中华文明起源与早期发展综合研究), a government-initiated and -funded program running from 2001 to 2015, consult Zhang et al. 2019.

for the Chinese example combined with the presentation of a unilinear and Central Plains-centric and text-driven teleological narrative, silences the voices of those perceived to be on the margins, not part of the civilization in question and thus morally inferior. Another book that discusses China in connection with civilization concepts is the textbook “Ancient Civilizations” by Scarre and Fagan which has been around since 1997 and is by now in its fourth revised edition. The authors decided on a much broader definition for civilization in archaeology “as a shorthand for urbanized, state-level societies” (2016:7), being critical of check-list approaches and emphasizing variability, yet still presenting a unilinear narrative of the powerful in a limited number of locations.

The underlying issues of the “origins of Chinese civilization” focus of debates surrounding Shimao thus run significantly deeper than a mere persistence of the “centrality of the Central Plains” in archaeological debates in China. Rather, there are conceptual issues involved that concern archaeological work worldwide and the persistent tendency to focus on the grand, the sensational, the impressive, and the powerful, reiterating the narratives told by and giving further visibility and influence to those in power in both past and present. In a current world that tries to make space for the voices and agency of marginalized groups, the power of the casual usage of words such as “civilization”, “state”, “complexity”, or “origins” and their often unintended but all too real implications for the answer to the question of “who owns the past” and thus also “who shapes the future” needs to be addressed. Given its size and impressiveness, discussing Shimao is clearly not a case of giving voice to the marginalized, but it does help to diversify the debate on prehistoric developments in the area that is now part of modern China, increasing diversity of narratives and working against the Central Plains-centric narrative as this highly thought-provoking article does.

As a side note, there are some recent publications of relevance to this topic that were probably not yet published when the authors submitted their paper for review. They are listed below for the convenience of the reader.

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