

*The Ancient Highlands of Southwest China: From the Bronze Age to the Han Empire*, by Alice Yao, 2016. Oxford: Oxford University Press; ISBN 978-0-19-936734-4; hardback £34.99; 288 pp., 51 b/w images

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Recent archaeological research in the so-called border regions of China has brought to light finds that do not fit into a traditional centre-focused and often text-driven narrative of the emergence of Chinese civilization. These finds now feature more broadly in textbooks and overviews of Chinese archaeology, albeit often within centre-periphery rhetoric (e.g. Liu & Chen 2012; Shelach-Lavi 2015; Zhongguo 2003). At the same time, recent years have seen an increasing number of book-length regional studies focusing on places other than the Central Plain and engaging with larger theoretical questions and explanatory models (e.g. Flad & Chen 2013; Hein 2017; Shelach 2009).

Yao's monograph fits into this recent trend, focusing on the edges of the Han Empire and discussing major theoretical questions of *time*, *temporality*, *History*, and *historicity*, engaging also with the concept of *zomia*. *Zomia* (coined by van Schendel 2002, and developed further by Scott 2009), refers to the highlands of Southeast Asia and its inhabitants, suggesting that this rugged terrain was a point of retreat for people who wanted to escape the control of nation states to live a more simple life. Previous criticism of this concept notwithstanding, Yao does not contest the existence of a *zomia* but accepts this term as a referent for the highlands of southwest China and Southeast Asia inhabited by 'tribal groups' that had been connected through trade since at least 1500 BC (p. 16), arguing that rugged local geography did not prevent formation of complex political structures (p. 216). Her study provides evidence for this claim, showing the emergence of complex polities in the high-elevation valleys of Yunnan. Although a study of the highlands of southwest China, then, as the title claims, it is a southwest China seen from the viewpoint of emergent complex polities in the river valleys, not from the mountains. Rather than a study of *zomia* as a region without states, this monograph is thus 'a study of institutionalized politics in prehistory' (p. 21).

This narrative fits with the author's declared aim to make southwest China relevant for research on empire formation world-wide and to provide a more nuanced view of the Han Empire and its margins. Additionally, the author wants to make a contribution to theoretical discourses of time and its perception, investigating how time is culturally constructed. To that end, she distinguishes between *History* as descriptive framework that orders people and events, *historicity* as human perception of time and *temporality* as subjective experience of time as lived in social practice (p. 37), a definition that is based on Lucas' (2005) framework. While Lucas focused on theory, Yao's study develops, applies and tests theoretical ideas on time perception in one case study. While telling the story of southwest China from the Bronze Age to post-conquest times in a linear fashion herself, Yao argues that in the past cyclical and linear frameworks of time

were important to local identity formation (p. 3). She thus suggests that there is no dichotomy between cyclical and linear frameworks of time, showing how both are reflected in the burial record of the lacustrine basins of southwest China.

The book is structured in three parts, focusing on theory and method, Bronze Age developments, and finally the southwest under Han rule. The Introduction clarifies that this study is not only interested in time, but also engages in discussions of local agents under colonialism and wants to make the Chinese case 'relevant for comparison with other ancient empire formations' (p. 5).

Part I (Chapters 1–2) of the book discusses issues of theory and method. To connect theory and the material record, Yao proposes to use memory studies that have been developed in archaeology 'as a response to the ahistorical representation of peoples that is common in archaeology' (p. 30), showing how the past was used 'to produce a sense of collective identity and cultural continuity, especially during periods of rupture' (p. 43). She focuses on physical markers of memory construction, especially monuments, their construction and use.

This approach proves to be ideal for the analysis of Bronze Age material from the Qujing and Dian basins, presented in Part II (Chapters 3–5) of this volume. To understand how people remembered, she traces how burial mounds were formed and used, how they grew over time and how the layout and content changed.

Focusing on the early Bronze Age, Chapter 3 analyses the burials of three sites in the Qujing valley, tracing the progressive scaling-up of mounds as well as changes in burial orientation, grave groupings and burial goods. The unequal distribution of bronze artefacts in funerary contexts is interpreted as evidence for the rise of certain individuals in power based on their martial performance in times of conflict. Yao 'identifies emergent territorial politics in projects of mound-building', arguing that these building projects 'formed the basis on which different corporate groups seek to distinguish ancestral memories and control the production of general time' (p. 21).

Chapter 4 describes how individuals who had accumulated wealth and influence through the trade between highlands and lowlands became 'drum-owning chiefs' within an increasingly stratified society. In Chapter 5, Yao combines evidence from historical texts from the Central Plain, ethnographic accounts and imagery on drums or cowrie containers, suggesting that these items or their fragments were used to refer to past events, owners and lineages to negotiate power-relations in the present and form the future (p. 160). Yao argues that, at the same time, mounds become fully-fledged monuments establishing and legitimizing the 'Mimo's territorial presence' (p. 162). Simultaneously, new food and drink items, as well as ornamental weapons of Dian origin in Qujing, reflect an increasing dependency and political asymmetry between the inhabitants of the Qujing and Dian valleys, a development that is described in Part III (Chapters 6–7).

The key premise underlying this is the 'centrality of cemeteries at sites of imperial intervention' (p. 167). This assumption is based on textual evidence from a *c.* fifth-

century AD text, the *Hou Hanshu*. Although the author points out this discrepancy in time (as well as place), she argues that the numerous related text passages reflect an 'imperial preoccupation with the regulation of social production', trying to subjugate the 'natives' not merely in the political sense, but also in terms of a 'progressive habituation of life and death to Confucian logic and institutional time' (p. 47).

Chapter 6 discusses changing burial customs in the 150 years following the conquest of the southwest by the Han Empire. The Dian Basin sees the rise of the 'illustrious horsemen' who occupied 'a major position in long-distance trade' (p. 211) and yet were not equipped with S-shaped belt hooks indicating Han status. The latter object type occurred in what Yao defines as commoner graves, which make them 'almost indistinguishable from Han commoners' (p. 205). The author argues that the inattention to burial activities seen at the mounds in the Qujing valley reveals 'the intervention of state control' (p. 205). It is only several generations after the conquest that the secondary burial of king Fu Han in one of the old mounds may be a sign of a local revitalization of territorial claims, suggesting that even after the conquest, the situation in the southwest was by no means as peaceful as the texts suggest.

Instead of a summary, Chapter 7 discusses the imperial-style seals found in a small number of Dian and Qujing graves. Often interpreted as a sign of *sinization*, the royal titles that some of them bear commit a transgression, but at the same time emulate Han customs to elevate their own status. Yao argues that these leaders were neither autonomous drum-owners like their predecessors, nor 'Potemkin kings', but 'both collaborators and insurgents; sometimes subjects and other times not' (p. 218). Yao suggests that seals thus served the goals of an individual, while drums and mounds were a communal assertion of legitimacy, power and group cohesion.

In addition to its wider theoretical goals, this study contributes to long-ongoing discussions on the function and meaning of seals and drums in southwest China. At the same time, the monograph goes a long way toward breaking up stereotypical views of the Han frontier as only indirectly administered and remaining beyond state control until the Ming. Yao argues that 'the disjuncture between textual and archaeological sources pries open political time as shaping relations of domination and contestation in the frontier' (p. 233). This study shows that the combined use of multiple sources of data goes far towards understanding the many contingencies of spatial politics in southwest China from the ninth century BC to AD 23 and beyond. While the overarching story is convincing in its multi-faceted depiction of local developments and outside connections, the indiscriminate use of texts from later periods and the direct application of ethnographic observations for the interpretation of the archaeological evidence pose challenges.

The lack of attention to details of source criticism and terminology is surprising. The use of the term 'Mimo' to refer to the inhabitants of the Qujing valley is especially problematic, as the author herself points out (p. 15, n. 2). Likewise, the terms 'tribal', 'tribe' and 'chieftain' used throughout the book are not clearly defined and the evidently

underlying social typology is not discussed. Being highly contested, Neo-evolutionary models of social development should not simply be assumed or applied, but should be discussed, especially in a theory-focused study such as the present one. This omission may have been an editorial decision aimed at streamlining the narrative and making this already theory-heavy book more readable.

While inferences regarding memory creation and identity formation are well founded, the jump from memory to historicity and temporality remains difficult. It remains questionable how aware the actors were of the temporal contingencies and what their perception of time in terms of personal temporality, local historicity, or imperial history may have been like. As these distinctions are rather fine, it is likely that mourners in burial rituals—be they in the Qujing valley or the Central Plain—did not reflect on them consciously. There is still much to be discussed in the detail of how these connections can be made and in which situations temporality and historicity may be a fruitful lens of analysis. As this book makes a major contribution to this discussion, it is to be hoped that it will be read not only by China specialists or people interested in early empires, but by scholars interested in time perception, memory creation and identity formation in other parts of the world as well as on the theoretical level.

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