Book Reviews

Life and Afterlife in Ancient China. By Jessica Rawson. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023. Pp. xxxiv + 506. $39.95.

Just as it is a pleasure to welcome a friend from afar, so it is a delight to read a book by a first-rate scholar in a field that is not one's own, but that even so is of such consequence that it cannot be ignored. Fluently written and formidably well researched throughout, this description of the roots of the current Chinese state as evidenced by twelve burial sites, from the three millennia up to the imperial unification under the First Emperor (r. 221–210 B.C.E.), will doubtless become basic reading on countless undergraduate courses, and deservedly so. The main text is a good read, for sure, but checking the endnotes is always rewarding, not simply for the extra references—there is a list of further reading at the end of the book, but no final bibliography—but also for the treatment of complex problems adding nuance to the narrative. Right from the start in the thirty-page introduction, it is made clear that although the focus is ostensibly on times long past, there are remarkably durable and distinctive elements to Chinese civilization even today that may be traced back for millennia, such features as the physical setting that includes the unique loess landscape that has added its tinge to the Yellow River, and the high regard for ancestors that has survived dramatic changes in the conception of the unseen world in which they make their dwelling.

The main account of the dozen burials starts over four millennia before our time, closer to the lower reaches of the Yangtze (Yangzi) and far from the loess lands of the north. Yet the site at Liangzhu 良渚 reveals a world of waterways and rice fields that already possessed in abundance jade artefacts, still the hallmark of later Chinese taste. These jade pieces retrieved from burials obviously link to status and power and at times look stylistically also to antecedents much further up the coastline. But if a world of transregional trade already existed, it was not one that proved immune to violent disruption. The scene switches to another site in the loess lands, at Taosi 陶寺, which gives elaborate evidence of feasting prepared for an afterlife, rich in ceramic utensils, that had deliberately been destroyed as the outcome of an incursion and massacre by pastoral peoples around 2000 B.C.E. Violence, too, marks the next chapter, in which the tomb of a warrior with a severed hand is examined, but now we have entered history, with the Shang dynasty around 1200 B.C.E. using writing so that this man's identity is known: he was called (to convert the appellation into modern Chinese) Ya Chang 雅昌. While it might look as if archaeology is here reaching an era still part of Chinese-language narratives of the past today, the next chapter by contrast is a stark reminder of how much now lies beyond our reach, even beyond our understanding.

For the fourth chapter takes us west to Sichuan, to the baffling bronzes from the pits of Sanxingdui 三星堆, apparently not a burial but some form of sacrifice, in a land that was then, as far as we can tell without writing, possessed of beliefs that we can only guess at in the light of a material culture almost completely unknown elsewhere. One of the virtues of this book is that it tells us what we still do not know, and in this chapter, it emerges that what we do not know is, in this case, rather extensive. This salutary diversion, however, is followed by an examination of a burial at Baoji 寶雞, home to early allies on the western borders of the historic Zhou dynasty, where one soon senses that we are once more on a far firmer footing, even if this was a territory that was eventually ceded to others as the Zhou moved eastward. There, in the eighth century B.C.E., we find the burial of the Lord of Rui 芮, a member of the Zhou clan. Historical sources for the events of this epoch exist, but they avoid bad news with the self-assurance of any contemporary politician. Jade, some of it already very ancient, betokens links with the main Zhou court even as cultural influences from outsiders with links far to the west are also in evidence. There are signs of the consolidation of Zhou dominance at the level of ritual regularity in the vessels buried, but was this dominance at the ritual level no more than a rhetorical cultural device, designed to mask a real weakness?

Then at the Yuhuangmiao 玉皇廟 site near Beijing, once an outpost of the Zhou, we encounter a leader of the outsiders, resplendent in the fashion of a warrior from the steppes with gold ornaments in animal form. In the early seventh century, the way of the Zhou was not the only way, nor was the occupant of this tomb expecting an afterlife anything like those of his Zhou contemporaries. But cultural influences of this sort did not only make themselves felt along the perilous frontier of the north. The next site, Shuangdun 雙墩, on the River Huai 淮河, shows that in 600 B.C.E. a round tomb reminiscent of those of the distant Altai mountains might be found even to the south of the main Zhou power in a region predominantly associated with its own distinct southern culture. More typically southern was the burial of the ruler of Zeng 曾 in about 433 B.C.E., where the magnificent array of musical instruments includes a gift from the main southern state of Chu 楚 with this equivalent date inscribed upon it, though even here northern elements are identifiable, once one has seen past the extraordinary array of sixty-five tuned bells, with other instruments besides.

When we return northwards, the next burial, that of King Cuo of Zhongshan 中山王厝, who reigned from about 327 to 313 B.C.E. near today's Shijiazhuang 石家莊, we are in a state founded by pastoralist, the Di 狄, who achieved their own synthesis of elements from the steppes and from the Yellow River plains. Whatever language the king spoke to his kinfolk, his propaganda as inscribed on the vessels buried with him is all in Chinese and affirms the tone of moral superiority already familiar from rulers using that language. Not so the penultimate burial, at Majiayuan 馬家塬 in Gansu, among tombs from the fourth and third centuries B.C.E. in which

gold and silver abound, together with weapons of iron, to the complete exclusion of jade. These people we only know in written sources from descriptions by those in sedentary societies in Chinese, or in languages such as Persian describing their cultural kin.

Finally, then, we reach the burial of the First Emperor and his attendant army of thousands, still only excavated in part, but dazzling in the scale and ingenuity of the emperor's achievements. The army faces south, ready to combat the ghosts of the tens of thousands done to death during his conquests, but the technologies deployed in the tomb once again point westward, with hints of links not simply with the steppes but also with other sedentary empires like that of the Achaemenids. Yet there is something unique in the modes of organization exhibited here, for example in the stamps on some of the component parts of the soldiers indicating who had been responsible for their creation, thus combining mass manufacture with rigorous notions of quality control. All that has gone before bears witness to much in the way of wealth and power, but here we encounter the basis for long-term civilizational success.

Of course, a summary survey such as the foregoing can scarcely do justice to the erudition that has gone into not simply the dozen descriptions that constitute the framework of this book but also the many asides ranging over later times and places to point up parallels and continuities worth bringing into the narrative as well. Here is a picture of ages past that certainly expands our horizons, especially in its insistence that we are never dealing here with a world apart, but one that was always informed by broader contacts. Particularly prominent are contacts to the north putting the lands of the Yellow River in touch with cultures stretching far to the west. This may not look like news: from the dawn of European studies of China, the notion that that country was a colony of Egypt or Babylon was bandied about by scholars, though they were of course innocent of modern archaeology and unduly influenced by their own cultural heritage. Egypt and Babylon were in the Bible, Tuva was not. Yet, as it turns out, it is excavations in Tuva amongst other places that give us a far better idea now of how ways of life that spanned the steppes right across Eurasia impacted inhabitants of worlds thousands of miles apart. As a result, the subjects of the later Zhou kings may well, for example, have understood what sort of people the Scythian policemen employed in Athens at the time were, though they were certainly not hired from a polity that had any direct links with East Asia. In this respect the careful discussion in this book of the archaeological evidence for a broad cultural continuum lacking political integration contrasts with a purely philological approach that sometimes seems to exhibit a tendency to assert linkages in a much bolder and less nuanced way.[1] This is not to

[1] Note in this regard Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Scythian Empire: Central Eurasia and the Birth of the Classic Age from Persia to China* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023).

deny, however, that a disciplined combination of archaeology and philology is capable of uncovering what looks like useful and concrete information.[2]

But if a very clear picture emerges from this book of an environmentally distinct yet always permeable boundary extending across the north of the world that it discusses, the same cannot be said for the south. In the map on p. xviii displaying the "Tombs of Ancient China," the entirety of the lands south of the Yangtze Valley on the lower half of the page contains nothing save modern place names, suggesting that no tombs have been found there. The reality is of course more complex, but a word or two of explanation of the absence of the deeper south from a discussion of ancient China might not have been out of place. It was after all an inaugural lecture at Oxford that first announced to a British readership the continuing genetic difference of the Chinese south today.[3] The closest the book comes to discussing the very different cultures beyond the primarily northern to Yangtze focus is with the discussion of Sanxingdui, a site that in the preceding map on pp. xvi–xvii of the "Tombs of Ancient China" is swallowed up between the pages.[4] One wonders if archaeologists might profit from considering the world views of the people still to be found in the empty portions of the map. The visually stunning totem pole–like figure who dominates reports of Sanxingdui, for example, was evidently holding in his hands large and round objects that have disappeared, which made me recall that in 2007, when I had the opportunity to join the Hani people on the border with Laos in their Spring Festival, striking tree trunks rhythmically on the ground was an important element in their rituals.[5]

A further dimension of all these finds also passes without comment, though not a spatial one. All the tombs involved were evidently created by persons amply endowed with wealth and power, but plainly they constituted but a fraction of the total population, and so do not reflect more than the beliefs of that minority, however influential they may have been. In many places mention is made of the remains of others, often but not always women, dispatched before their time to accompany their lords into the land of the dead. One hopes that a confidence that they would continue

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[2] For example, Michael Peyrot, Federico Dragoni, and Chams Benoît Bernard, "The Spread of Iron in Central Asia: On the Etymology of the Word for 'Iron' in Iranian and Tocharian," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 885.3 (2022): 403–22.

[3] Glen Dudbridge, *China's Vernacular Cultures: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on 1 June 1995* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

[4] In the "List of Maps" on p. vii, these maps are given different titles, namely "China and Eurasia" and "China and its provinces."

[5] The position of the hands makes it possible that they originally grasped a single object, so possibly one tree trunk rather than two.

to serve in a post-mortem capacity gave them some solace at their end. But many others are unlikely to have enjoyed even this comfort: at Sanxingdui, for example, there are severed heads, unlikely to be those of intended companions, while we learn (p. 68) that the Shang dynasty was, over the course of its existence, probably responsible for the sacrifice of some thirty thousand human beings, culled from a neighbouring ethnic group. Whether these denizens of the world known to the Shang in any way shared the conception of the afterlife demonstrated by the burials of the Shang lords is unknowable, though quite probably they did not. The ancestors of today's Hmong, after all, lived next door to speakers of Chinese for centuries, yet even today their afterlife remains entirely distinct and very much their own.

Even the best of books has its limits, though it may be rather churlish to point that out, and especially so in the case of one that contains such a feast of learning so palatably arrayed before us. But lest future students feel intimidated by the remarkably high standard achieved here, perhaps a brief indication that this will inevitably not be, in one or two instances, the last word on the topic may not go amiss.

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