



2018

Ancient China and its Eurasian Neighbors: Artifacts, Identity, and Death in the Frontier, 3000-700 BCE

Katheryn M. Linduff
University of Pittsburgh

Yan Sun
Gettysburg College

Wei Cao
Shaanxi Normal University

See next page for additional authors

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Linduff, Katheryn M., Yan Sun, Wei Cao, and Yuanqing Liu. "Ancient China and its Eurasian Neighbors: Artifacts, Identity, and Death in the Frontier, 3000-700 BCE." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

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Ancient China and its Eurasian Neighbors: Artifacts, Identity, and Death in the Frontier, 3000-700 BCE

Description

This volume examines the role of objects in the region north of early dynastic state centers, at the intersection of Ancient China and Eurasia, a large area that stretches from Xinjiang to the China Sea, from c.3000 BCE to the mid-eighth century BCE. This area was a frontier, an ambiguous space that lay at the margins of direct political control by the metropolitan states, where local and colonial ideas and practices were reconstructed transculturally. These identities were often merged and displayed in material culture. Types of objects, styles, and iconography were often hybrids or new to the region, as were the tomb assemblages in which they were deposited and found. Patrons commissioned objects that marked a symbolic vision of place and person and that could mobilize support, legitimize rule, and bind people together. Through close examination of key artifacts, this book untangles the considerable changes in political structure and cultural makeup of ancient Chinese states and their northern neighbors.

Keywords

Ancient China, Eurasia, material culture, frontier, identity

Disciplines

Archaeological Anthropology | Asian Art and Architecture | Asian History | Asian Studies

Publisher

Cambridge University Press

ISBN

9781108290555

Authors

Katheryn M. Linduff, Yan Sun, Wei Cao, and Yuanqing Liu

ANCIENT CHINA AND ITS EURASIAN NEIGHBORS

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IN THE FRONTIER, 3000–700 BCE

KATHERYN M. LINDUFF

University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

YAN SUN

Gettysburg College, Pennsylvania

WEI CAO

Shaanxi Normal University, China

YUANQING LIU

Shaanxi Normal University, China



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One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108418614

DOI: 10.1017/9781108290555

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First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-41861-4 Hardback

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INTRODUCTION

THE INNER ASIAN FRONTIER RECONSIDERED

A BOOK SUCH AS THIS TOOK MANY PEOPLE AND MUCH TIME TO ASSEMBLE and accomplish. The collaboration for this volume was formed in Xi'an in 2010 when Profs. Cao, Linduff and Sun met to discuss the material and to travel across the region together to take a hard look at new materials, new excavations and the topography and overall setting of the *beifang*. As it has been identified in the past, the *beifang* stretches from the China Sea across the northern provinces of present-day China, including especially Jilin, Liaoning and Inner Mongolia, to those in the north and west, Ningxia, Gansu and Xinjiang. Although we had all been there many times before and conducted fieldwork in the region, after that trip we decided to take on the task of trying to frame an overarching study of the region that even today is at the outskirts of cosmopolitan China and is fragmented because of the vast distances, mix of peoples, languages spoken, lifeways, varied topography and climate conditions. We immediately agreed that the ancient culture area could not be bounded by the current borders of China (the *beifang* in earlier studies), and we had to account for those who we knew were important players in the landscape of Eastern Asia, including peoples who lived in present-day Mongolia to the north, Kazakhstan to the west, and Russia to the north, west and east. Although we chose to focus primarily on the easternmost region of this enormous area, we hope that our study will also eventually inform understanding of the aforementioned territories.

A work of collaboration such as this often takes longer to produce than expected. In our case the work of shaping such a study was stimulated by fresh insights inspired by decades of accumulated research and field experience that

often were dizzying as well as exciting in their implications. There were many meetings face to face, and countless phone and Skype conversations that helped to develop our perspective on the material, to collect the data and finally to share the task of writing. In 2013–14, Yuanqing Liu came to Pittsburgh on a Fellowship from the Department of Education from the People's Republic of China to work on Eurasian steppe materials with Katheryn Linduff. As a PhD student at Shaanxi Normal University studying under Wei Cao, she was well positioned to work directly with us on this project, and as the year progressed she took more and more responsibility for helping to produce a draft of Chapter 4. To provide a unifying approach and theme for analysis, Katheryn Linduff and Yan Sun have worked through the entire manuscript many times and gained hard won agreement on how to shape the study. We all have learned enormously from each other and have tried to speak with one voice throughout, surely a goal of truly collaborative work.

We had help along the way from graduate assistants Jiayao Han, Meng Ren, Elizabeth Morrissey and Allison McCann; from Veronica Gazdik in the making of images; and especially from Haihui Zhang, Director of the East Asian Library, for innumerable impossible searches for the bibliography, etc. Travel funds were secured from the University Center for International Studies at various times to take Professor Linduff to China. All this aid and assistance came from the University of Pittsburgh. From Gettysburg College came support in the form of professional development funds for Professor Sun, as did assistance from students Ziyi Xu and Xiyang Duan. The Cambridge crew kept us on track; they provided such careful editing that we have been saved from immeasurable mistakes and all the while they responded even to our tiniest questions with respect and patience. They include Beatrice Ruhl, who understood and supported the aims of our work; Edgar Mendez, who led us through the proposal and submission process; and Anamika Singh, Katherine Tengco and William H. Stoddard, who meticulously helped prepare the final version of the manuscript. Our three anonymous readers not only kept us on point by asking critical questions, but also trusted our goals. To all of the above we owe immeasurable gratitude. Last, Yan Sun would like to dedicate her research in the book affectionately to the memory of her father Guochun Sun (1935–2016), who sparked her interest in history and who was an unwavering supporter of her academic endeavors and career.

THE RECONSIDERED INNER ASIAN FRONTIER

The Inner Asian Frontier has been dealt with as a monolithic entity, one where “steppe” peoples were thought to have lived and where cultural traditions were not Chinese. During the late twentieth century and most recently in the past two decades, these notions have been tested and challenged by systematic

archaeological investigation. We focused first on characterizing the region, but not as dependent on the emerging dynastic activities of the third through the first millennia BCE. We attempt not to generalize about the people and materials found there, but focus rather on the differences among the assemblages and peoples. This shift of attention to the Inner Asian Frontier as worthy of study in its own right has allowed a very different picture to emerge.

What became apparent was a picture of many entities, sometimes polities, sometimes made up of clans or territorial, geographic or economic groupings that as best we can tell do not often conform to archaeological cultures defined as coherent human communities by archaeologists based on the spread of ceramic types and styles. Sometimes the groups we defined in the later periods paid allegiance to the dynastic peoples in the Central Plain off and on and to varying degrees of closeness. Sometimes the central power conferred bureaucratic titles, and sometimes groups complied with attempts to centralize or assimilate, but most often these areas at the edges of the dynastic structure vied for power among themselves and with others, including the dynasts themselves. In doing so, they frequently created separate identities for themselves that could be identified and are explained by assemblages of artifacts that assert quite mixed cultural or group references.

We think that this region is best studied as a multicentered frontier, one where allegiances shift constantly and where self-identified units were generated, established and collapsed. The variation identified in material culture, especially as deposited in burials, might have indicated differences in lifeways, languages, customs and ambitions. We use concepts called technoscapes, lineagescapes, regionscapes and individualscapes to discuss the archaeological and inscriptional data at different scales, and in the process also distance ourselves from a Sinocentric view.

These are the ideas that shape this study – our analysis of material evidence is intended to shift the discussion away from the search for sources of the dynastic core culture and who contributed to it, to an analysis of diversity and flexibility in identity building in cultures outside of the dynastic centers. This allows an expectation of changing frontier dynamics and brings into focus reasons that various peoples adapted or remained aloof to the power of the dynastic centers.

This volume looks at three time periods from c. 3000 to 1500 BCE to examine technoscapes and the materialization of ideas in metal (Chapter 2); to look at the north central and northeastern frontier in late second and early first millennium BCE (Chapter 3); and to witness the rise of states and the formation of group identities in the Western Regions of the Inner Asian Frontier from about 1500 BCE to the eighth century BCE (Chapter 4). We hope that this study will change the narrative of history for this region and perhaps for East Asia in general to one that sees culture and society as dynamic, diverse and changing rather than primarily unifying and centralizing.

The results of the collaboration have shaped the book as follows:

Chapter 1: *Shaping the Study of Inner Asian Artifacts and Mental Boundaries*

Katheryn M. Linduff

This volume is about artifacts as markers of life and death on the Inner Asian Frontier and how they construct and mark mental boundaries from about 3000 to 750 BCE. The goal of this chapter is to conceptualize the role that artifacts played in life and death in a type of place that we call a frontier, as do Parker and Rodseth (2005), or one that is called a middle ground (White 1991), a contact zone (Pratt 1992), an arena of socio-economic-political competition (Dietler 1998) and/or a tribal zone (Ferguson and Whitehead 2005). Such places witnessed the intersection of peoples who saw themselves often as different from each other as well as from the state-level societies that they abutted.

We have chosen to focus on material culture and see it as explicable only in context. Most especially, we have the objective of explaining how and why metal burial artifacts were also rooted in identity construction in this place at this time. In addition, we have made a distinction between studies that are object-centered and those that are object-driven. Object-centered studies are usually concerned with single or individual objects, often as they relate to technological advances and conceptual issues, or in terms of their aesthetic value. These studies have been very useful among archaeologists in China and art historians and often dominate and form reconstructions of archaeological cultures into a historical narrative. Object-driven studies, on the other hand, are interested in the object in context, and with the interface between the object and the context that allows us to understand the gist of their use. It is the second definition that we think best guides our analyses in this volume. With this in mind, another important aim of the chapter is to explain the capacity of artifacts to define groups and individuals in significant ways in their regional and local contexts and to estimate the functional value of the objects in these early Bronze Age societies according to their own prehistory.¹

Our attempts to shape excavated materials into meaningful groupings across the entire period and geographic extent of the study have led us to propose four concepts aligned according to shared, purposeful uses of artifacts, especially bronzes: technoscapes, individualscapes, regionscapes and lineagescapes.

Chapter 2: *Technoscapes and the Materialization of Ideas in Metal on the Inner Asian Frontier (c. 3000–1500 BCE)*

Katheryn M. Linduff

¹ Throughout this chapter, and indeed throughout the volume, materials from the Inner Asian Frontier are characterized by comparison to ritualized bronze artifacts produced for consumption primarily in Shang and Zhou dynastic centers. We do not mean to imply that the artifacts from the Central Plain cultures were of one type only, but that those artifacts were often taken as models of a standard or emblem of dynastic centers and power.

The study of early Bronze Age cultures in Eastern Asia must begin, as in other parts of the world, with an understanding of the conditions under which this important transition took place. The polities that began to use metals, and especially alloyed metals, have been thought to have appeared in places where increased societal stratification accompanied by a coalescence of geographically extensive shared inventories of metal or other items, appeared. This is the case in the Central Plain of China during the second millennium BCE in what Chinese archaeologists have called the late Neolithic Longshan culture. Several or all of the following factors have been assumed to have contributed to or even to have provoked the formation of early polities with adequate societal complexity to produce alloyed metals: demographic shifts; long distance trade; craft specialization; emergent collectively held religious and/or political ideologies; and centralized resource allocation, among others. But metallurgy emerged earlier outside of the Central Plain (Linduff and Mei 2009) in our contact zone (in Xinjiang, Gansu, southern Mongolia and Inner Mongolia) no later than the third millennium BCE.

This chapter is about what metal artifacts were known and how they were used on the Inner Asian Frontier and how they marked mental boundaries (Shelach-Lavi 2009: 73–75) from the period of the first documented use of metal (c. 4000 [brass]) up to the emergence of state-level societies in northern China, or to about 1500 BCE. The earliest metal artifacts produced across northern Inner Asia most often have been studied in the past as peripheral to the hallmark ritual bronze vessels of dynastic China in the Central Plain, but are here studied in their local contexts in several locations across the frontier, where they appear at an even earlier time than in the Central Plain. The appearance of metallurgy and its products on the Inner Asian Frontier is seen within a constructed technoscape that assumes contact with technology and/or peoples to their west through Xinjiang and to their north through southern Mongolia. Once located, the sociopolitical function of these artifacts in burial ritual, as well as their role in the building of a local or colonial identity, is discussed.

Understanding the changing frontier dynamics across time is clearly fundamental to our account of material culture in the contact zone to the north of the Central Plain. With recently available archaeological data, it is now possible to propose that metallurgy was introduced via at least two routes: (1) into southern Mongolia and northern Shanxi and (2) into Xinjiang and Gansu (Linduff 2010). The yardsticks mentioned above will be used to gauge the functional value of the objects to these early Bronze Age societies. In order to define this ancient cultural region, it is necessary to extend beyond the borders of present-day China and to include its Eurasian counterpart in the Altai (Afanasievo, c. 2800–2500 BCE; Elunino/Chemurchek culture, c. 2500–1800 BCE), as well as those in the west in Kazakhstan, Xinjiang and Gansu. The spread of this technology is defined here as a technoscape that knows no

modern national borders in order to avoid the China-centered vs. Russian-centered arguments of previous discussions. The spread of this technology has defined the currently known areas of contact and exchange into distinctive geographic regions defined in Chapter 1 that will also govern the discussion of groups followed in later periods in Chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 3: *Identity and Artifacts on the North Central and Northeastern Frontier during the Period of State Expansion in the Late Second and the Early First Millennium BCE*

Yan Sun

Written sources and material remains richly document Shang contacts with various groups in the north, yet there is no evidence to date of direct political control there by the Shang. The Zhou fundamentally changed this situation with the establishment of regional states. For the first time, a dynastic power, namely the Zhou, set up colonies in the form of regional states or military garrisons intended to exert and expand its cultural and political control in the border regions, especially to the north and east of the Zhouyuan, the Zhou political center. As a consequence, communities in the north of present-day China faced an immediate and direct challenge from the central power and needed to make choices to survive politically and, as will be proposed, culturally. Technological expansion went hand in hand with the emerging, colonizing statecraft of the period and created another technoscape with the deliberate mission of marking dynastic territory and membership in the confederation. These areas we have subdivided and defined as lineagescapes, individualscapes or regionscapes, depending on the types of evidence found in each area. Clearly the elite had access to such materials not only to equip their armies in order to remain dominant by force, but also to furnish and maintain important state rituals, as distinct from their use in ancestral rites among the Shang. Many of these metal signifiers found their way into burials of the local as well as the relocated Zhou elite and bore inscriptions that gave the names of dedicators and some idea of the purpose of their casting. They celebrated allegiance to the state, but also to one's own family and its members' accomplishments. Such varied use of burial items multiplied the signifying power of material objects in burial.

Distinctive cultural transitions took place earlier on the frontier during the second half of the second millennium BCE when the Shang emerged and endured as a strong dynastic power in the Central Plain. Metal artifacts found in the Central and Northeastern regions during this time period also displayed stylistic, iconographic and technical connections with bronze-using cultures in the Central and Eastern Eurasian steppe. Juxtaposed with portable personal ornaments in metal and colorful stones, Shang capital-style bronze vessels were either directly imported from the Central Plain or particularly inspired by the Shang and locally manufactured. Archaeological materials of

the communities residing in subregions within the Central and Northeastern regions displayed various means and degrees of adoption of the Shang ritual culture, implying that identity building was independent and flexible depending on time and location. Examination of archaeological evidence will be used to identify and discuss how polities and peoples in these regions represented themselves through selection of artifacts and mortuary practices and how they responded to the cultural expansion of the Shang.

Material evidence is not the only record available of peoples in the Central and Northeastern Region. Oracle bone inscriptions, the Shang royal divination records, documented Shang interactions with various groups in the north in the form of marriage, trade, tribute and warfare. From the Shang perspective, communities outside their central domain in the Central Plain in the north and northeast were allies or enemies, but the relations were by no means fixed and depended on political circumstances on all sides. The comparability or contradiction between material culture as indicative of the relationship with the Shang and the Shang royal records of that same interaction will be important considerations for this study. Frontier models have inspired our analysis of identity-making among the northern groups.

When the Zhou ascended to power in the Central Plain, their ambition was to include the north as part of their lands through the establishment of regional states or military garrisons. The Zhou penetrated local communities in the north in an explicit attempt to exert and expand their political and cultural control in the region. Consequently, communities to the north of Zhou territory faced an immediate and direct challenge from the dynastic power and needed to make choices to survive politically and culturally. The research in this chapter and in Chapter 4 is the first attempt to determine the role of the northern borderland and its artifacts within the emerging, colonizing statecraft of the period. The discussion is centered on how cultures in the Central and Northeastern region were perceived by the Zhou and how these local communities and individuals presented and/or represented themselves in material culture in response to the changeover of political regime in the Central Plain and the subsequent colonial expansion of the Zhou. In addition, the form and dynamism of the interactions between Zhou regional states and local cultures will be discussed. The research in this chapter will integrate three kinds of evidence: archaeological discoveries, inscriptions on bronzes and received texts.

Chapter 4: *The Rise of States and the Formation of Group Identities in the Western Regions of the Inner Asian Frontier (c. 1500 BCE to the Eighth Century BCE)*

Wei Cao and Yuanqing Liu with Katheryn M. Linduff and Yan Sun

During the late second millennium BCE, the second of the Chinese traditional dynasties, the Shang, was formed in the Central Plain. The relation to and attitude of the Shang toward peoples living outside of their domain were

documented in royal divination records and oracle bone inscriptions when the capital was at Anyang. Those records, naturally from the Shang perspective, record various nondynastic polities or groups living at and occasionally within the borders of Shang dynastic control. Active interaction in the form of marriage, trade, tribute and warfare was pointed out in the inscriptions. They were allies or enemies of the Shang at Anyang, but the relations were by no means fixed, nor were the groups uniformly dependent on the political largesse of the Shang. The inscriptions, however, recorded the presence of many groups and the outlook of the Shang toward them. There was not an aggressive Shang expansionist plan overall that might color the approach toward “outsiders,” although some colonization apparently allowed access to natural resources. The most conspicuous remains of this activity in the second millennium BCE have been excavated at Zhukaigou, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR) (Chapter 2) and Panlongcheng, Hubei. Both seemingly provided a source for large lodes of metal ores as well as its local control and distribution within an ever enlarging technoscape.

The greater amount of evidence of these groups is found in the large corpus of material objects excavated across a wide area on the frontiers of Shang control. These groups either manufactured or obtained metal items. Modern analysts have suspected them of being dependent on the better-known metal-using cultures of the Shang, early Zhou, or Steppe areas. Our approach here is, however, not to assume that that core–periphery model is at work, but to explain the nature of such “borrowings” in relation to choices made from the point of view of the local patrons. The signature role especially of the bronzes in assigning or transmitting status and/or identity is probably the most reasonable interpretive route to follow. This process as documented by the mere presence of these items on the frontier created a newly configured technoscape that was shared, borrowed and/or invented, often within already established but confined bronze-using groups.

When we describe and interrogate that material culture, especially that which resembles in some fashion dynastic models, both the closeness to and type of interaction, or lack of it, with the Central Plain or one of its tributaries are important to determine. For example, at Sanxingdui, Sichuan, was it a central Yangzi model that inspired or provided Shang-like bronze vessels and motifs found in burial pits there, and not a direct borrowing from the Central Plain? The arrows of transmission infrequently originated from direct contact or knowledge of the parent culture, in this case the Shang center at Anyang, and its production and output of objects. Rather, they originated from the desire of the local community for self-projection of status or identity through the possession and display of exotic goods, a new technology, or at least a type different from those in their home market. Whatever else can be said about such borrowings, this exchange is distinctly different from that of the Shang.

The Zhou approach to possession and extension of territory to their east and probably to access to signature technology and material products distinguished their early political conduct.

The peoples who deposited such materials in frontier burials continued to have shifting friendly or hostile relations after control in the Central Plain changed hands and the Zhou came to power. The expansionist approach when setting up the Zhou confederation included the giving over of metallurgical knowledge and/or goods to member states. Some of those states were located on what had previously been the frontier of the Shang polity. The distribution of Zhou materials followed their expansion into those areas and marked Zhou control and territorial custody, at least among the leadership of states outside of the Zhouyuan. On the one hand, access to metals shifted, for instance, and some possessed them simply through their new affiliation with the Zhou. On the other hand, those who gained access to and often produced their own artifacts probably developed different motivations or incentives for their use. Some excavated sites on the frontier of the Zhou lacked “dynastic” control, but their patrons were quick to learn and use the new technology and types of objects. Even within these new early Zhou state territories, we found tombs with collections of grave goods of mixed provenance and stylistic and typological heritage that marked diverse identities at death.

Most materials from all subregions come from the solemn setting of burial. In such circumstances, we must assume that carefully laid out spaces were filled with materials that were charged with social, political and cultural markers of worth and were also indicators of the status of the deceased and his/her community. It is the actions and power of the artifacts in such contexts that we endeavor to explain in this chapter as regionscapes, as individualscapes or occasionally as lineagescapes.

Two distinctive geocultural regionscapes formed in the northwestern region: the Hehuang Valley, Qaidam Basin and Hexi Corridor further to the northwest; and the Jing and Wei River valleys where the Zhou rose to power. The former area served as a conduit where bronze cultures from Xinjiang, Gansu and central Eurasia and from north in the Mongolian Plateau in Eastern Eurasia filtered through and into the heartland of China. Archeological studies indicate that the role of agriculture in the local economy in this area gradually decreased from the mid-second millennium BCE and an increasing emphasis on animal husbandry could be witnessed in many communities. This change coincided with the increasingly fragmented cultural landscape presented by the documentation of multiple archaeological cultures. Communities were loosely connected with each other through shared lifeways and by the adoption of similar pottery vessels, but a high degree of regional variation can be observed within single designated archaeological cultures, and implies a fragmented cultural and social landscape. This setting argues against using archaeological cultures as defined

human communities. Metal, including personal ornaments, tools and weapons, was employed in tombs, but with no clear distribution patterns across age, gender and social status. The considerably limited number of metal materials and sporadic presence in selected individual tombs suggested that the materials were yet to be fully explored as indicators of the group identity of elites.

The second region, the Jing and Wei River valleys, played a unique role in the Northwestern area. It was a place where peoples from further north and northwest and those in the Central Plain met and interacted during the second half of the second millennium BCE, especially the last couple of hundred years. Consequently, the high volume of interactions in the region stimulated the rise of the Zhou clan centered on the Ji and Jiang kin-based lineages. The presentation of identities in burials in the region experienced interesting transitions from early use of small ornamental metalwork and tools, which displayed stylistic connections with ones from further north and west, to Shang- and Zhou-style sacrificial vessels found in dynastic centers. Shang written language was adopted not only by the Zhou, but also by the Siwa culture in the upper Wei River valley. The Zhou served as a centripetal force pulling surrounding local groups into a fledgling regional community to the west of the Shang. The emergence of the Zhou as a regional power in the Wei River Valley and their partnerships with various groups in the west eventually elevated them into a strong contender with the Shang, so that they defeated the Shang and became a centralized dynastic power.

The dynamic process of forming kinship-based lineage groups in the northwest did not cease with the transition of the dynastic power from the Shang to the Zhou in the Central Plain. The region continuously witnessed the emergence of lineage-based polities such as the Yu and Hu in the Baoji area in the Wei River valley and the He and Jing in the upper Jing River valley. Most prominently, bronze objects themselves and written inscriptions on some of them were employed by these lineages to define their identities. They were intent on establishing lineagescapes parallel to others in the area. This region is quite varied and poses an interesting locus for examination of the varying functions of bronze artifacts when defining identity groups.

Chapter 5: *Final Statements/Conclusions and Future Challenges*

Katheryn M. Linduff and Yan Sun

This section brings together patterns that have been identified in all the sections described above: frontiers and contact zones; mortuary analysis and ritual; artifacts and their contextual analyses. The concluding section of the volume synthesizes key historical patterns for the region and discusses how these have been treated through a historical and anthropological orientation of the volume. The regions have been explored by bringing attention to what we call technoscapes; individualscapes; lineagescapes; and regionscapes. The “scapes” that have been identified cut across archaeological cultures to

form alternative units for analysis that have been brought together and are synthesized in the end. Projections about the essential need to systematically and scientifically analyze these artifacts will also be reviewed.

And finally, our volume and the work done preparing it has parallels with the region we discuss. It is on the frontier of previous analyses of East Asia – and we, its interpreters, have tried to keep a regional voice that stands at arm's length from the Central Plain and to avoid the formerly inevitable pull of traditional, sometimes normative, explanations. We hope to have succeeded in understanding these ancient frontier peoples and the purpose of their artifacts.