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*The Cultures of Ancient Xinjiang, Western China: Crossroads of the Silk Roads*. Alison V. G. Betts, Marika Vicziany, Peter Jia, and Angelo Andrea Di Castro, eds. Summertown, Oxford: Archaeopress, 2019. 205 pp., 215 figures, bibliography, index. Paperback, £38.00, ISBN 9781789694062.

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When Sven Hedin set out to explore the region at the end of the nineteenth century, Xinjiang was one of the least known areas in Asia for Westerners. Unfortunately, this is still largely the case, at least in archaeology, over 100 years later, despite a significant increase in the amount of archaeological data coming out of this region during the past several decades (see, for example, the special section on the archaeology of Xinjiang and surrounding areas edited by Annie Chan and published in *Asian Perspectives* vol. 59, no. 2 in 2020). One of the main reasons is that today’s Western archaeologists generally lack the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in Xinjiang due to political restrictions.

An exception is the Australian team spearheaded by Alison Betts of the University of Sydney, which has managed to participate in several projects in Xinjiang and has contributed considerably to this field. The edited volume reviewed here represents this team’s most recent effort to introduce the rich ancient cultures of Xinjiang to the English-speaking world. The origin of this volume dates back to a workshop entitled “East and

West: past and future” held at the University of Sydney in 2012. The papers included in this volume are a selection of the lectures presented in the workshop. To enhance the representativeness of the volume, the editors enlisted researchers from three Australian institutions (the two others are Monash University and the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organization), a few German, French, and Uzbek researchers working in nearby central Eurasian countries, and several prominent Chinese archaeologists who have done extensive fieldwork in Xinjiang. Given the small pool of experts on the archaeology of Xinjiang, the editors’ efforts to offer contributions by researchers working on a wide range of topics in a single volume deserve much of our respect.

This volume has 11 chapters. Except for Chapter 1, an overview of the book, and Chapters 7 and 8, which discuss the cultural history of the Kashgar Oasis during the historical period, the chapters are devoted to the study of the Bronze Age to early Iron Age archaeology of Xinjiang and its neighboring regions. This includes two chapters that the

editors put at the end of the volume, probably to highlight their emphasis on methodology. The volume's skew toward the study of prehistory is more of a reflection of the reality of the archaeology in Xinjiang than the editors' failure to balance studies on different periods. For decades, the sites that have received the most attention in Xinjiang have been highly visible, massive prehistoric cemeteries. Their rich grave goods have long been the focus of archaeological excavations. Only recently have local archaeologists started to seriously address this problem by diverting more attention to the study of historical remains such as cities, citadels, and beacon towers.

Marika Vicziany provides an excellent overview of the volume in the opening chapter. She summarizes the main contributions of this collection as refocusing researchers' attention on the river valleys and mountain passes of western China, identifying the diverse routes and mechanisms of cultural connections, expanding understanding of the social background, and demonstrating the great potential of new technologies in the study of inter-regional communications in central Eurasia. She emphasizes that the volume demonstrates that the cultural links between Xinjiang and its neighboring regions existed in multiple directions on multiple levels rather than occurring only through an east-west Silk Road. This conclusion deconstructs the conventional notion of the "Silk Road" to represent a more nuanced understanding of ancient interaction networks of Eurasia.

Alison Betts presents a comprehensive narrative of the prehistory of Xinjiang in the second chapter. She summarizes the early Bronze Age cultures of Xinjiang into three traditions, Qimu'erqike, Tianshanbeilu, and Xiaohe. Betts asserts that further development of these traditions and the expansion of foreign cultural traditions into Xinjiang, for example, the expansion of the "Andronovo culture" from the west, led to the formation of a diverse array of regional cultural traditions during the following period. In line with mainstream opinions, she argues that the primary driving force behind the cultural changes in prehistoric Xinjiang was population migration. Readers will find her narrative a useful framework for understanding many of the following chapters.

Disappointingly, this important chapter lacks maps necessary to help readers visualize the scope of the mentioned archaeological cultures.

Three chapters by Yidilisi Abuduresule, Wenying Li, and Xingjun Hu (Chapter 3), Dexin Cong (Chapter 4), and Xuetang Liu (Chapter 5) offer valuable accounts of archaeological discoveries from the Xiaohe Cemetery, upper Yili (Ili) Valley, and Bortala River Basin, respectively. Although the Xiaohe Cemetery is an internationally well-known site, this is the first time such a complete and detailed summary of the discoveries from the site has become available in English. The upper Yili Valley and Bortala River Basin both are located in the mountainous region of western Xinjiang, an area long-neglected by archaeologists. Cong and Liu discuss two clusters of recently excavated prehistoric sites in these areas, whose importance is increasingly being recognized. For this reason, Marika Vicziany says that these chapters "provide an important corrective to previous understandings of the Bronze Age" (p. 6). Another merit of these chapters is that they provide rich information about smaller and less elaborate sites as compared to the primary cultural type-sites. For example, Abuduresule and colleagues introduce a series of cemeteries distributed in the Lop Nor region and lower Keriya River Valley that share similar material culture with Xiaohe. Cong introduces several occupation sites, cemeteries, and rock art sites for readers to contextualize the discoveries at the primary site of Adunqiaolu. Like typical Chinese archaeological reports, these chapters are all highly descriptive, with compelling photographs and rich line illustrations, but lack sufficient engagement with the broad literature on Eurasian archaeology.

Nikolaus Boroffka and Leonid Sverchkov's Chapter 6 shifts the geographical focus to southern Uzbekistan. Here they found the hand-made painted ceramics from Maydatepa (Bandykhan I), a Yaz I type settlement site, to be very similar to those from central Xinjiang, particularly the site of Xintala. Because the end of activity at Xintala and the beginning of Maydatepa appear to coincide, the authors make a bold argument that the parallel in material cultures was a consequence of a

migration from Xinjiang to western Central Asia caused by a climatic oscillation that occurred around 1400 B.C. Their hypothesis is innovative, since previous scholars have almost exclusively proposed that people migrated from western Central Asia to Xinjiang rather than the reverse. However, arguing for a climatic oscillation in central Xinjiang based on a paleoclimatic reconstruction in northeastern China does not seem to be convincing. Also, new radiocarbon dating results suggest that Xintala probably was abandoned earlier than Boroffka and Sverchkov thought, around 1600 B.C. (normalized radiocarbon dates, *Zhao et al. 2013*). Therefore, readers will need to be cautious about their hypothesis.

Unlike Boroffka and Sverchkov, Henri-Paul Francfort is skeptical about using migration as an explanation for the parallel designs that occur across a vast area. In his insightful Chapter 7, “Shifting Exchange Patterns during the Bronze and Iron Ages between China and the West in Eurasia,” Francfort sketches out a three-stage developmental trajectory for the network of Eurasian exchanges from the third millennium B.C. to the second century A.D. based on similarities in artistic styles. He convincingly demonstrates that this network matured at a much earlier age than what researchers have usually thought. He even states that “we cannot assert that the network of Eurasian exchanges was broader under the Roman dynasty of the Julio-Claudians than during the time of the Afanasevo (Afanasiovo) culture, in terms of extension and even in terms of intensity” (p. 106). He also stresses that interactions not only occurred along the east-west axis but also along the north-south axis within this network. Readers interested in the diffusion of artistic styles in ancient Eurasia will find his account fascinating.

Marika Vicziany and Angelo Andrea Di Castro’s Chapter 8, “The Kashgar Oasis: Reassessing the Historical Record,” and Angelo Andrea Di Castro, Marika Vicziany, and Xuan Zhu’s Chapter 9, “The Kashgar Oasis in Buddhist and pre-Buddhist Times: The Archaeological and Environmental Record,” can be read in tandem. In Chapter 8, Vicziany and Di Castro point out that

negligence of research on Kashgar is a major gap in Western scholarship on ancient Xinjiang. Through an exhaustive review of historical records, they reveal the importance of Kashgar to Eurasian history as a transition zone for persisting long-distance trade between East Asia and the areas west of Xinjiang. Their perspective stands out from others because they pay special attention to Kashgar’s long-term structural role in a massive trading network rather than merely discussing political regime changes in the oasis. In Chapter 9, Di Castro and colleagues discuss Kashgar’s Buddhist remains and the natural and social environment that have nurtured them. They successfully reveal the enormous potential for exploring the long-term interactions between humans and the environment in Kashgar with multidisciplinary methodologies. Readers interested in undertaking similar projects will find their thought-provoking accounts useful for generating new ideas.

John Dodson, Pia Atahan, and Xiaoqiang Li’s Chapter 10, “Unravelling Farming and Metallurgy in Ancient China with Nuclear Science,” is the only method-oriented article in this volume. It introduces the principles of isotope analysis and demonstrates its great potential in three case studies of early bronze in Gansu, early wheat in China, and food consumption in early China. As all of these case studies have been published previously, no new data are reported in the chapter. Readers interested in isotope analysis and its application in the archaeology of northwestern China will find this chapter worthy of their attention. It is a little disappointing that this chapter only briefly mentions Xinjiang; its geographical focus is clearly on the neighboring Gansu province to the east.

Peter Jia and Florence Chau’s contribution, “Early Wheat Cultivation and Plant Use in Xinjiang Prehistory: New Evidence Based on Starch Analysis,” provides the first starch residue analysis of stone tools in Xinjiang. Jia and Chau have done an excellent job explaining the methods and properly reporting the results. However, they do not relieve readers of concern for potential contamination of their samples, which is a critical issue with starch grain analysis. Also, the insecure

chronology of the sites they sampled undermines their conclusion. That said, their work is undoubtedly valuable for pioneering the application of starch grain analysis in Xinjiang.

The volume could not, of course, cover all aspects of archaeology in Xinjiang, but its content would have been more balanced had it included a few more chapters on the archaeology of the eastern Tianshan area, as numerous new sites have been excavated there in the past two decades (Ma et al. 2014, 2016; Wang et al. 2010). The authors could have engaged more with the most up-to-date publications on the chronology of important sites, palaeoclimate reconstruction, and archaeobotanical studies (Huang et al. 2009; Zhao et al. 2013). Also, the volume has some obvious cosmetic flaws. For example, the area of Xinjiang given on page 9 should be “1.665” rather than “1665” million square kilometers. The chronology of the Han and Jin dynasties mentioned on page 74 should be corrected from ca. 200 B.C.–A.D. 200 to ca. 200 B.C.–A.D. 400. The city name “Dunhang” on page 103 should be changed to “Dunhuang.” Several chapters mistakenly spelled the site name “Gumugou” as “Gumuguo” (a pervasive typographical error not limited to this volume). Figure 13 on page 190 is missing labels for the individual photographs of starch grains. Additionally, some figures in this volume are a little blurry. It would be better had the authors used images with a higher resolution.

Despite these minor flaws, the volume as a whole is outstanding. It gives readers a new view on the recent development of archaeology in Xinjiang and helps bridge the gap between Chinese and Western scholarship on this heartland of the Silk Roads. Researchers interested in the ancient cultures of Xinjiang will find it useful for informing them

about recent research progress and stimulating inspiration for future directions.

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