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The People Between the Rivers: The Rise and Fall of a Bronze Drum Culture, 200–750 CE. Catherine Churchman. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. xvii + 266 pp. Hardcover, US \$85. ISBN 978-1-4422-5860-0.

Reviewed by Erica Fox BRINDLEY, *Department of Asian Studies, Pennsylvania State University*

The People Between the Rivers is a masterful historical account of an important region, its peoples and chieftains, and the various Chinese administrative empires with which they constantly interacted. It provides a focused, interdisciplinary analysis of cultural interactions involving a neglected group of peoples over a large expanse of time, approximately 550 years. The author's main sources are texts, mostly histories and other treatises written during the period under examination, but Churchman also brings broad insights and critical approaches from linguistics, archaeology, and anthropology to bear on the study; the result is nothing short of spectacular. This study provides a crucial missing link in the chain of our understanding of premodern China–Southeast Asia relations. It is one of the finest histories concerning first millennium C.E. East Asia or Southeast Asia that I have seen in years.

Churchman's work on what she calls "the people between the rivers" (i.e., the Red River and Pearl River) concerns groups referred to as the Li and Lao in Chinese language sources of the period. This book adds considerably to a growing body of scholarship on the history of the southern reaches of the East Asian mainland, sometimes referred to as China's southern frontier.¹ *The People Between the Rivers* fills an important lacuna in our understanding of this frontier by

providing a convincing account of the political structures, trade networks, and cross-cultural contacts of peoples in the Two Rivers Region, one that helps explain the eventual formation of Vietic states to the southwest. To date, there has been very little work on these ancient peoples in Western scholarship. Churchman is one of the first Euro-American scholars to take this region as an integral unit that might be discussed on its own as a vital crossroads among peoples of incredible diversity and difference and as a crucial node for understanding basic problems in the history of Chinese empires and frontiers.

Churchman is sophisticated in her use of social science theories and methods and provides a critical reading of her sources. Although this region has been understood to be part of "China" for the last thousand years, Churchman shows that it can be fruitful to view it as the "northernmost extension of a Southeast Asian cultural world" (p. 12), at least during the first millennium C.E. Approaches garnered over recent decades in the study of Southeast Asia can be employed to study this region as well. Churchman also makes use of a wide variety of languages and scribal systems beyond her primary sources in classical Chinese to greatly enrich the account. Secondary sources in Mandarin, Vietnamese (written in Chữ Nôm), Japanese,

French, German, and English were consulted and discussed in some manner.

The contributions of the book are many. Foremost, the book outlines crucial changes in political structures, administrative practices, trade, and strategic alliances that together offer a plausible, step-by-step model of cross-cultural contact and interaction. Churchman thus rewrites the history of “sinicization.” Instead of sinicization of the region, we see mutual accommodation and even a type of reverse response to sinicization during part of the period covered. Second, the book stresses the importance of paying attention to the distinction between lowland-upland peoples rather than focusing on contemporary, nationalistic distinctions between the regions of “Chinese” Guangdong and “Vietnamese” Jiaozhou. Churchman shows that there were stark differences between the cultural complexes of imperial, administrative, military states and those of upland chieftains, while the lowland administrative centers of Guangdong and Jiaozhou actually had more in common than they had with the uplands regions between them. Third, the book outlines a history of peoples who have heretofore been neglected in most scholarly accounts of southern Chinese and Southeast Asian history. And lastly, Churchman’s account of how trade worked between the people of the Chinese empires and the peoples of the Two Rivers Region is of great interest, not least because it involved human trafficking and slavery, which are not well-discussed in the scholarship of premodern Asia.

The language Churchman uses throughout the book is nuanced and innovative and advances our approaches to studying so-called “lost” cultures and the history of cross-cultural interaction. By referring to the region she studies as the Two Rivers Region, its peoples as the “people between the rivers” or the Li and Lao peoples, their culture as “bronze drum culture,” and their political units as *dong* chiefdoms, Churchman avoids the pitfalls of relying on national and ethnic categories that, without proper contextualization, can obscure the changing realities under investigation. For example, the phrase “Two Rivers Region” is relatively devoid of cultural baggage and unattached to nation-state divisions inherent

in formulations such as “southern China,” “Yue,” “Lingnan,” and so on.

Churchman breaks new ground with her conclusions. She shows that even after the imperial conquest of the surrounding river plains and coastal regions, the Two Rivers region witnessed the growth of powerful, non-Chinese political structures (*dong* chiefdoms) associated with a bronze drum culture. This helps explain the archaeological discovery of more than double the number of Heger II-type drums associated with this region than any other category of bronze drum in the entire South China and Southeast Asia region. Churchman further clarifies that the process of cross-cultural interactions over the approximately 400 years between the Han and Tang empires is one in which contact with Chinese empires actually had a reverse effect on sinicization, what she calls a “de-Sinicizing effect” (p. 204). This defies the standard story that contact with Chinese culture would inexorably result in the loss of one’s culture and socio-political structures, but resonates with recent work by James Scott (2010) and others on non-state peoples in the Zomia regions of Southeast Asia.

Churchman ends her narrative by demonstrating that the powerful Tang empire was able to negotiate with and bestow administrative and military ranks on the heads of *dong* chiefdoms to bring large, consolidated chunks of the region under imperial, administrative control. From such a position of power, the Tang would then reorganize and fragment the administrative units, wresting power from the erstwhile *dong* chieftains and defeating smaller groups of recalcitrant peoples. This fine-woven account not only enables us to see how the process of cross-cultural interaction had its own specific history (one that ran counter to the sinicization model for hundreds of years), but also to see how such a history involved specific imperial strategies of negotiation that would eventually favor a transition from *dong* to administrative unit and the eventual dissolution of bronze drum political structures in the region.

While the scope of the project is tightly defined and Churchman accomplishes virtually everything she sets out to do, there are nonetheless areas that might have been

explained in more detail. For example, how might the ethnonyms Li and Lao, so relevant for the Southern Dynasties period, have fit back into the larger complex of Yue or Luo-Yue from the Han period and earlier? In addition, a more explicit discussion of how the bestowal of administrative titles on *dong* chiefs compared with the act of casting and displaying bronze drums in the context of bronze drum culture would be helpful. Is it possible to know the relative prestige of each form of legitimacy at different periods of time, or can such information not be gleaned from the record?

The People Between the Rivers should be mandatory reading for anyone interested in premodern Chinese and Southeast Asian history, especially the history of cultural contact and change involving diverse populations of people. It is a remarkable piece of scholarship on the cross-cultural interactions in premodern East and Southeast Asia, and it helps provide an integral, missing piece to the puzzle of how Vietnam came to be Vietnam, and how Chinese empires and states, since 1000 C.E., came to occupy more permanently the southern reaches of the East Asian mainland.

NOTES

1. In just the past decade, many edited volumes and a few monographs have been published on the ancient or premodern southern frontier of China. Examples include [Cooke, Li, and Anderson \(2011\)](#), [Mair and Kelley \(2015\)](#), [Anderson and Whitmore \(2014\)](#), and [Brindley and Baldanza \(2014\)](#). For archaeological monographs, see [Kim \(2015\)](#) and [Yao \(2016\)](#). For political, cultural, or religious histories involving one or more regions along the southern frontier, see [Brindley \(2015\)](#), [Baldanza \(2016\)](#), and [Clark \(2016\)](#).

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