

Centers and peripheries in ancient China

In the ancient world, what constitutes a center? How are political, cultural, economic and ritual centers and their associated landscapes interrelated? How should we understand so-called peripheries and the interactions between people in these regions and those in political centers in ancient contexts? *Ancient Central China: An Archaeological Study of Centers and Peripheries along the Yangzi River*, published in 2013, addresses these questions through a focus on Central China in the area along the Yangzi River and its tributaries, from the Sichuan Basin downstream through the Three Gorges into the area of modern Hubei and Hunan. This area is chosen because it includes two regions that are commonly considered “centers” based on their political prominence as known from archaeological and historical sources, and includes a “peripheral” area that has recently been the focus of intensive archaeological research. Data produced over the past decade provide new insights from this peripheral region that encourage us to reconsider the ways that centers and peripheries are presented in archaeological, historical, and geographic research.

The two “centers” in this part of the Yangzi River valley were areas where complex polities or “states” emerged in the last two millennia BCE. One developed in the Chengdu Plain of the Sichuan Basin and is associated with a site called Sanxingdui (ca. 1700–1100 BCE), in Guanghan, and successor sites in the Chengdu City area. The other emerged in the

Middle Yangzi River region where local trajectories toward complexity began in the fifth millennium BC (Guo 2005), culminating with the state of Chu (pre-790–223 BCE), which was established at the end of the second millennium as one of the urbanized, literate states during the Zhou period.

Separating the Sichuan Basin from the low, flat plain of the Middle Yangzi River is the Three Gorges, a region that has long been perceived as an evocative yet peripheral place. Associated in historical treatments with a loose confederation of communities referred to by the ethnonym “Ba,” (and more infrequently to another ethnonym “Yong”) the depth of history in the gorges has only recently become more thoroughly understood through archaeological investigations – particularly starting in the late 1990s with the full scale development of the Three Gorges Dam. The “peripheral” character of the Three Gorges region previously left it marginalized as a research focus, but the new data has illustrated the benefits of considering political peripheries more closely.

It was the construction of the massive Three Gorges Dam, which regrettably led to the submergence of many sites, villages, towns and historical locations within the region, that forced archaeologists to frantically unearth previously unknown site before they were submerged beneath the rising waters of the new reservoir. The emerging data published starting in the early 2000s made it clear that the Three Gorges and

surrounding areas were not peripheral in every sense in antiquity. In fact, the area was a vibrant focus of production and trade, migrant communities, and interregional interaction as early as the last several millennia BCE due in large part to the exploitation of local salt resources. A comprehensive account of Three Gorges archaeology in relation to the neighboring regions makes this process clear and also provides an opportunity to explore archaeologically the general questions of how we define “centers” and “peripheries” and how social ties between interconnected regions developed and changed over time in antiquity.

The book is the result of a long collaboration between the two authors – classmates in graduate school and long term co-researchers during the succeeding decade. In it we present diachronic change in communities across Central China with an emphasis on the Three Gorges during the last two millennia BCE. The book reconsiders centers and peripheries by showing that the centers of the *political* and *historiographical* aspects of landscape were not exactly coincident with centers of other social “topographies” including those of *production*, *exchange*, *ritual* and *identity*. Some of the data come from excavations of a prehistoric salt production site called Zhongba, about which I have written another book: *Salt Production and Social Hierarchy in Ancient China: An Archaeological Investigation of Specialization in China's Three Gorges*. That book focused primarily

on the site where we conducted our archaeological excavations, but only tangentially engaged with the broader regional context. Pochan Chen, of National Taiwan University, who recently passed away in 2015, had focused his dissertation work on the broader economic landscape of the Three Gorges. His work prompted our more fulsome treatment of this region within an even broader geographical context in this book. The Three Gorges are considered not only as an example of a pe-

riphery discussed in its own right, as a “center” of ancient human activity, but because a discussion of this area shows how multiple landscapes overlap in various and dynamic ways across a larger region.

Reference

Rowan Flad and Pochan Chen, (2013). *Ancient Central China: An Archaeological Study of Centers and Peripheries along the Yangzi*

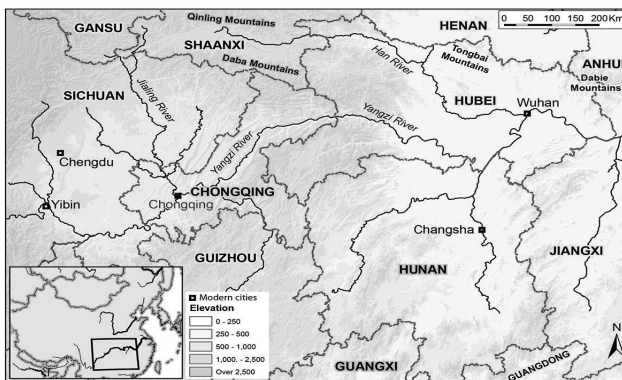
River. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Professor Rowan K. Flad

John E. Hudson Chair of Archaeology, Department of Anthropology, Harvard University
rflad@fas.harvard.edu

Professor Pochan Chen

Department of Anthropology, National Taiwan University
(Deceased)



Central China Map – This book uses the term “Central China” to refer to the modern provinces of Hubei, Hunan, the Sichuan Basin and the municipality of Chongqing. For some, the “Central Plains” of northern China would seem to be a more accurate area described as Central China, but this book challenges assumptions about centrality and provocatively reconsiders what we should consider central or peripheral in studies of landscape and history.



Image of Zhongba after the Three Gorges Dam was constructed, resulting in flooding of the Ganjiang River, a tributary of the Yangzi in Zhong County, Chongqing.