

## **The Geopoetics of Invention and the Movement of Archaeology** Sanxingdui 三星堆 and the Southwestern Silk Road

At the Academy I studied a module in Chinese philosophy with Professor Cheng and was drawn to the 1973 unearthing of the 'Four Lost Classics' in three richly furnished Western Han 漢 dynasty tombs at Mawangdui 馬王堆, Hunan. 'Believing that these texts served as foundational texts for the First Emperor of Qin, with whom Mao liked to compare himself, politicians pressed for a swift transcription' (Vankeerberghen 2014, p. 308). The image of archaeologists and researchers standing in the rain in a pit in Mawangdui also illuminated something to me of the transhistorical consciousness, care and method to thought as it is traced both backward and toward the current historical juncture.

I learnt that Sanxingdui was largely discovered in 1986, following preliminary findings in 1927 and has since unearthed many remarkable bronze and jade artifacts and textual materials dated to the ancient Shu kingdom. I thought it was interesting how discoveries at Sanxingdui and Jiangxi have led Chinese archaeologists to develop a new interpretive framework, 'challenging the traditional narrative of Chinese civilization spreading from the central plain of the Yellow River, to one speaking of multiple centers of innovation jointly ancestral to Chinese civilization' (Shaughnessy and Loewe, 1999, p. 10). I was also deeply drawn to a comment by Professor Lu in the tour of Chengdu museum discussing the eclecticism of Chengdu as a site at the confluence of cultural cross-currents and distant influences. I read of how Chengdu, in the Song and Tang dynasties, was at the heart of trade passing through Yunnan, Myanmar, and South Asia. James A. Anderson (2009) describes the movement of religious thought, Buddhism and Islam, along these routes, and I was fascinated by how archaeologists excavate the movement of thought from physical objects. I was also drawn to the idea of whether the philosophical and poetic writings of Edouard Glissant might

provide a new vocabulary with which to imagine the subterranean and itinerant routes of invention.

In 2020, Dr. Hajni Elias, a Professor at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge gave a webinar entitled ‘Transmission Along the Southwest Silk Road: The Cultures of Sanxingdui, Jinsha and Dian.’ Dr. Elias examines ritual bronze wares unearthed at sites across present day Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, drawing observable connections that illuminate the presence of regionally transmitted traditions linking multi-ethnic societies in the territories known from early Chinese textual sources as the Southwest. Dr. Elias’s broader work ‘eschews the Sino-centric approach of current scholarship and advocates a cross-regional study of cultural influence which has not yet been undertaken in this region’ (Elias, 2020).

I really gained a sense of the movement of archaeological practice from the tour of Sanxingdui site, the way the archaeologists carefully manoeuvred around, the rhythm of photographing or 3D scanning and uploading the image for viewing, the physical and optical acrobatics combined with the wonder and pull of fascination at the detail of each new artefact. I was also fascinated by Professor Sun Hua’s discussion of how in the case of other pits such as large Shang and Zhou dynasty relic pits, the entire site is cut out and shipped to somewhere with better working conditions of temperature, light, and humidity. I was curious of the movement of this shipping and how if there were a crash, the history of the artifacts would find a new layer of historiography, time is a river, Du Fu writes: ‘國破山河在 / 城春草木深 / 感時花濺淚 / 恨別鳥驚心 / 烽火連三月 / 家書抵萬金 / 白頭搔更短 / 渾欲不勝簪’ (Owen, 2016, p 62).

Two other comments also sparked thought, where Professor Lu described a geopoetics of invention out of fragmentation, in Chinese history, it was often the periods of brief disunity that facilitated invention, in literature, philosophy, religion, culture, disunity opened up spaces of opportunity, the

spring and autumn of the period of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. In the *Dao Companion to Xuanxue (Neo-Daoism)* 玄學 (2020), David Chai examines how an early school of thinkers in the transitional, culturally agitated Wei-Jin period would scrutinize the connection between words (*yan* 言) and their meaning (*yi* 意), names and actualities in the classical texts, tracing the concepts of absence (*wu* 無), structural coherence (*li* 理), and oneness (*yi* 一) into deeper, and much more complex, theoretically elaborated understandings of reality (Chai 2020, p. 4).

I was curious how periods of psychological disunity in a way might have separated words from meaning, shape from reality opening possibility. Teng Wai and Tang Juan note how ‘during the Wei-Jin dynasties (266 - 420AD) that followed the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 AD) and ended with the conquest of Eastern Wu, and the reunification of China proper, ‘the scholar’s awareness of individual life was awakened, but when they woke up, they found that they were in an era of brutal and precarious dark chaos. As a result, some of these scholars were keen on religious fantasies and they sought to explore the spiritual destination of their spirits; some of them revelled in unleashing their bondage while others simply lived as recluses in the mountains and forests to enjoy a temporary physical and psychological liberation’ (Teng and Tang, 2011, p. 73).

Professor Haas further described the geographic boundaries of the ancient kingdom of Shu at the time as diffuse, and introduced us to the work of G. William Skinner, arguing that cities in Chinese should not be seen as singular entities but as systems, and how urbanisation was not only a process unfolding in cities but drew together a wide archipelago of invention. I was curious of how this relationship between the invention of Xuanxue thinkers, who moved out into the mountains and forests, would open up a psychological history of invention as exile and return. I was also therefore fascinated by the presentation on the Dujiangyan Irrigation System in the Qingcheng Mountains, built by Li Bing during the Warring States period. This was a remarkable feat of geoengineering and flood control measures that utilised the ‘natural’ shape of the landscape.

I wrote a paper on the concept of *wu-wei*, so-of-itself and the lower position in the Laozi, and was fascinated in how philosophies of water informed ancient political culture. As Edward Slingerland notes, in the Daodejing, just as water that has fallen as rain and been deposited in the highlands naturally flows back into the valleys, so everything in the world eventually returns to the sage who emulates the Way and takes the lower position (Slingerland 1998, p. 99) For Laozi, Benjamin Schwartz notes, water is 'in a profounder sense stronger than stone' (Schwartz 1986, p. 203). I was fascinated by the way in which The Romance of the Three Kingdoms explores the historical theme of cyclicity, unification and division, the novel opens with the sentence: "domains under heaven, after a long period of division, tend to unite; after a long period of union, tend to divide."

I was reading recently of how Qing frontiersmen set about trying to solve the structural crises of the late Ming dynasty and how residual Ming loyalties in southern China drove forward policies like the Coastal Depopulation of 1661-1683 (Ho, 2011). I was also curious how structural transition and crises were creatively explored by writers in this period, Nurhachi apparently read "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms" many times in his youth. I was also curious if the novel would be taken overseas by the merchant communities fleeing China's southern coast for Southeast Asia and whether the novel would be drawn into new and different historical dynamics. Unification as an ideal also has a complex history in Southeast Asia with ideas such as Nusantara.

I also read a recent paper by a researcher at Delft University on water rights in Dujiangyan, where he researched the effects of population growth in Chengdu increasing demands for drinking water and tightening water conservation regulations with implications for communities living upstream (Gao, 2021). I have been reading elsewhere of water rights in the Himalayas, and I was also wondering if there were parallel cosmologies emerging across other river systems in Asia at the time Dujiangyan was constructed, that might draw on the geopoetics of relations opened up by

Edouard Glissant and Kamau Braithwaite. There also appears to be a lot of ongoing study of earthquake resilience at Dujiangyan following the Wenchuan Earthquake and I was curious if Dr. Wang Tun's Institute of Care-Life actively monitors the area. The agricultural monitoring potential of drones and possibilities for reducing the urban-rural divide and shaping the post-pandemic configuration of the city and the countryside I thought was an interesting element opened out by Professor Fan's interview, and I was curious if utilising the full potential of drone technologies might also require a deeper civilianisation of its innovation chain.

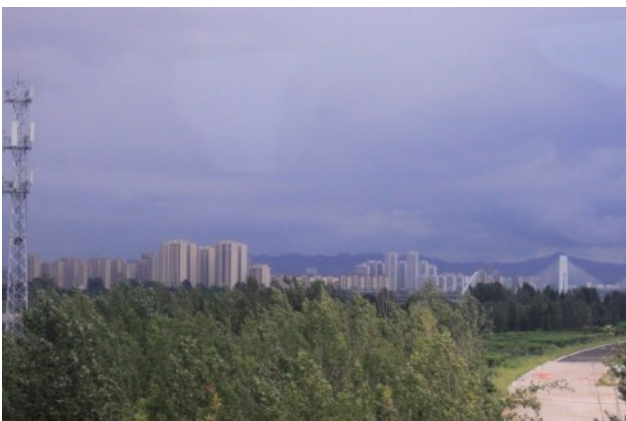
I was deeply moved by Professor Tang Yun's drive to provide earthquake early warning systems, following the devastating earthquake of 2008. I thought it was a powerful connection of stories with the Sanxingdui site in illuminating the transhistorical care and consciousness of the earth below and its power to move human life, physically and historically. I was drawn to the work of Di Wang studying Chengdu's teahouses under socialism. Di Wang describes a scene on the last day of 1949, as the People's Liberation Army marched into Chengdu, 'night fell and people squeezed into the teahouses, 'the day's news was put aside in favour of scheduled storytelling. The storytellers quickly lured listeners into strange and fantastical worlds—*Investiture of the Gods (Fengshen yanyi)*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo yanyi)*, and *The Legend of Yue Fei (Shuo Yue)*' (Wang, 2018, p. 3).

These roiling tales led listeners into well-known historical and political narratives as well as into ghost worlds, and it all overlapped with human society past and present, providing temporary relief from recent difficulties. Di Wang would also include a photograph of a Chengdu teahouse, taken by Joseph Needham between 1943 and 1946 which I thought was a fascinating historical document that re-illuminated much of Professor John Alekna's lecture on Chengdu and Chongqing during the war years as a hub of innovation and invention. Peter Hessler's talk on his time beside the Yangtze

and the heartbreaking story of Anry, whose brother blinded himself dynamite fishing in the Yangtze, stays with me.

I passed through Chengdu several years ago following the route of the overland Silk Road from Anaklia on the Black Sea to Shanghai on the East China Sea. I feel ashamed now to have not experienced the teahouses or People's Park of Chengdu and hope that one day I will be able to return and spend some time regathering my thoughts. I have learnt much this semester from the Field Study module which I thank Professor Lu, Professor Haas and Professor Fan for organising. The tours of Chengdu's Sanxingdui site, the Dazhu Rock Carvings and the interview with Professor Tang Yun at the Institute of Care-Life and the tour of JOUAV were particularly illuminating in locating the elision of modern technologies with ancient material and subject matter.

I think that the brevity with which I passed through Chengdu has left an imprint on my mind of the geopoetics of invention in movement and I hope that I will be able to explore further the history of Chengdu on the Southwestern Silk Road and along its new threadings into the Belt and Road Initiative. On the high speed train to Chengdu, near Hanzhong Railway station, I took a photograph, city high-rises, a chain of mountains, earth currents, there were trees blowing in the wind, a suspension bridge and a pylon, emitting signals somewhere else. I hope to return one day to Chengdu and sit in the People's Park or a teahouse, and regather the memory.



1983 words

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- Images: Image 1, page 6: author's photograph, Image 2, page 6: 'A teahouse in the open air' from the Needham Research Institute in Wang, D's Teahouse Under Socialism, 2018, page 9. The photograph was taken by Joseph Needham between 1943 and 1946.