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# 1 Introduction: Centers and Peripheries in the Ancient Yangzi River Valley

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## Preliminaries

We begin with a caveat. For many, “Central China” will appear to be misapplied to the region on which we focus in this book. The term may evoke the so-called Central Plains of the Yellow River valley in northern China, which are *central* to most discussions of Chinese civilization and *central* to the primary narratives of China’s origins. The area discussed here, comprising the modern provinces of Hubei and Hunan, the Sichuan Basin, and the municipality of Chongqing, is peripheral to these stories and often referred to as “Southwest China.” But the southwest of the modern People’s Republic of China (PRC) in fact includes the Tibet Autonomous Region, Yunnan, Guizhou, and the western mountainous parts of Sichuan not focused on here. Because archaeology speaks to the processes that set the foundations for modern nation-states, and because these nation-states play a considerable role in determining how archaeological and historical data are collected and considered, it is appropriate to use the PRC to identify our broader area of interest, and the Sichuan Basin, Chongqing, Hubei, and Hunan are actually just south of its geographical center. As this book makes clear, notions of centrality and peripherality need to be interrogated in our investigation of the ancient world, and our provocative use of Central China is intended to draw attention to this issue.

This book investigates diachronic changes in centers and peripheries in Central China from the late third millennium B.C. through the late first millennium B.C. This was an era of tremendous social change that had a profound impact on historical developments across East Asia. Our examination of this region is a study of *landscape*, by which we mean the geographically contextualized totality of interactions between humans and the environment in which they live and among humans within this environment. Although some scholars use the term *landscape* more narrowly to refer to spatial configurations of related phenomena, we prefer a more holistic understanding of the term. We then break down the

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landscape into multiple, overlapping conceptual topographies, each of which describes a region in terms of the relationship between places and the peaks and valleys of a particular mode of activity. The overlapping topographies include patterns of political activities, cultural affiliations, social memory, environmental variables, historiographical traditions, perception and experience, ritual practices, and economic relationships. Each topography has its own texture, which includes areas of more and less intense or influential activity. By comparing diachronic change in topographies, and the degree to which overlapping topographies converge, we can understand the processes of landscape development and its relationship to social transformation.

Descriptions of landscape tend to privilege certain topographies over others. For example, the peaks of political or cultural influence may be emphasized, regardless of whether the resulting picture effectively describes other interrelated aspects of the landscape. In defining such political centers or cores, emphasis is placed on the “degree of development” of political complexity (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1991) so the resulting descriptions of landscape relegate other regions to peripheral status. We understand “peripheries” following the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the regions, space, or area surrounding something; a fringe, margin. The outlying areas of a region, most distant from or least influenced by some . . . center.” The marginality of politically peripheral regions is not limited to their position vis-à-vis contemporaneous associated political cores. These places are also dismissed or relegated to secondary status by scholars, who examine, discuss, explain, and summarize the nature of the society in question. For two important reasons, however, this practice does not produce an adequate understanding of ancient landscapes.

First, peripheries as traditionally defined are powerful places. Existing both within and beyond political polities or social groups, they often occupy a vital conceptual space in the process of defining in-groups and out-groups, the self and the other. In historical and ethnographic contexts, peripheries play a part in the imagining of community (Anderson 1991), both for individuals living within the peripheral zones and for those in central areas, in opposition to which the periphery is defined. When regions are peripheral to multiple cores, they become contested borderlands with multiple, sometimes conflicting, influences. These borderlands provide fruitful stimuli for cultural change and necessitate the development of local identities that take a variety of relationships into account. In this book, we periodically turn to the Three Gorges, a politically peripheral region throughout history that has, consequently, been overlooked in most historical and archaeological studies. It is only

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possible to investigate this region now owing to the recent 15-plus-year salvage archaeology project in the Three Gorges necessitated by the construction, starting in the 1990s, of what is now the world's largest hydroelectric dam (see discussion in Chapter 3). This salvage work has transformed our understanding of this region and is a major milestone in the history of archaeology in the world. We will see that in its position between political cores, this region was an important, contested borderland.

Second, peripheral areas in *political* topographies are sometimes central to other aspects of regional landscapes and can also play vital roles in development *within* political centers. Areas that are critical nodes in production activity or important conduits in trade (such as the Three Gorges) can be politically peripheral, while remaining economically central. In some cases, when polities are highly centralized (and relatively small), the cores of most conceptual topographies may more or less converge. However, we believe this to be the exception and that most complex societies are characterized by complex landscapes with noncoincident, overlapping topographies. We see this in the modern world, where centers of commerce, political capitals, and religious centers are often in different locations, and we see this in the ancient world as well, in the ceremonial and political landscapes of Aztec central Mexico (Carrasco 1991a) and the transformations of cultural landscapes in Scandinavia during the Iron Age (Thurston 2001), to name two examples that we will revisit in our concluding chapter.

This book shows that the late prehistory and early historical period of Central China saw the development of two political cores, and yet peripheral regions between and around them were developing along their own trajectories and were central to various sorts of supralocal activity. One of the most important was specialized salt production, an activity that was concentrated in the Three Gorges region. The Three Gorges is one such political periphery, lying between the Sichuan Basin, where a political center emerged in the Chengdu Plain, and the Middle Yangzi of the Chu State. We shall see that the developments in these political core areas were, in fact, predicated on interregional interaction and that this interaction took place through political peripheries such as the Three Gorges. Our understanding of political developments must, therefore, involve an investigation of such political peripheries.

Furthermore, a narrative that is focused exclusively on changes in political cores will fail to explain processes of social change because it allocates all agency to the communities in the political core. Ultimately, we seek to question such a narrative by addressing two specific historical questions: (1) what was going on between the political cores in the

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Sichuan Basin and the Middle Yangzi during the last two millennia B.C.? and (2) what effect, if any, did developments in political peripheries have on the adjacent core areas?

Although our focus is ancient Central China, the questions we raise apply broadly to other regions and eras of East Asia and to wherever relationships between centers and peripheries are the focus of research. In East Asia, the implications of this approach are magnified by the increasing acceptance that multiple political centers were integral to the formation of “Chinese civilization” and, therefore, must be understood in relation to one another (Chang 1986; Shelach 2009; Su 1991). With the abandonment of a myopic approach to the origins of civilization in East Asia, it becomes clear that the areas of influence of any one political center cannot be easily defined. So-called peripheral regions interacted with multiple centers simultaneously. These zones of interaction were sometimes crucial to interpolity interaction, and in some cases, “peripheries” may have been central to other aspects of regional landscape, and, furthermore, so-called centers may become peripheral in some periods or when viewed from other perspectives. The perspective advocated here recognizes the importance of traditionally defined centers in the description of regional landscapes but encourages an emphasis on local histories, which draw our attention to the various components of multilayered landscapes and bring important peripheral places to the foreground.

In this introductory chapter, we briefly examine archaeological studies at a regional scale that lay the foundation for this approach. We examine ways that political, economic, ideological, and other topographies are considered and discuss how peripheries have been increasingly brought to the foreground in recent work on colonialism, identity, acculturation, syncretism, and related processes. By way of conclusion, we then outline the sections that comprise the remainder of the book.

### In Defense of “Centers”

Although it may seem ironic, we begin our attempt to draw attention away from the traditional emphasis on core areas with a defense of political and cultural centrality as useful research foci. Central places play significant roles in long-term social development in any region. The opinion that “there can be no civilization without permanent central places” (Renfrew 1975: 11) is held widely and not without merit. In political topographies, central places are those that exert influence through institutions of authority and integration. They are the locations from which various forms of political control emanate.

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The significance of political centers is connected to the degree of social complexity. Complex societies comprise interconnected communities (or households) that have developed high levels of interdependence among individuals, institutionalized inequality, and mechanisms of integration and authority that simultaneously cohere society and maintain heterogeneity. In small-scale societies that involve low levels of inequality and relatively few specialized social roles, political centers are not very meaningful. As larger communities incorporate into polities with paramount leaders who sometimes establish control over large regions, the locations where these individuals reside and where they conduct activities that create and maintain social order become central places that are the hubs around which society revolves. The homes of chiefs and the locations of feasts, public decision making, religious ceremonies, and so forth are political centers within complex communities.

On the regional level, where supracommunity polities exist, those places whose residents establish control over other communities become politically central (e.g., capital cities). This control can take on a variety of forms – from direct control through conquest, to colonization, to hegemonic, indirect control over communities across a large region (D’Altroy 1992; Hassig 1985, 1988, 1992; Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002; Stein 2005a). Other central places include those that serve to support political structures (such as pilgrimage sites that are intimately tied to political control). Political centers are, therefore, defined by their role in maintaining the institutions of interdependence, inequality, authority, and integration that underwrite complex societies and, in some cases, facilitating or controlling the movement of resources from the political periphery into the center. Many attempts to characterize regional landscapes in fact are descriptions of the political topography as defined by these political centers. Politically central places can be defined on local and regional levels, and identifying these places is an important part of regional analysis.

Centers of sociopolitical complexity are also emphasized in certain approaches to interregional interaction. Research informed by World Systems theory (WST), for example, identifies cores and peripheries based on the degree to which the societies in different regions are “developed” (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1991: 5) such that cores become the linchpins around which examination of interregional interaction takes place. This is true both in the original formulations of the WST model (Wallerstein 1974, 1975, 1980, 1989) and in the subsequent application of this concept to archaeological and other ancient contexts (Abu-Lughod 1989; Algaze 1989, 2005; Blanton and Feinman 1984; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1994, 1997; Frank 1993, 1999; Frank and Gills 1993;

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Gills and Frank 1990; Grimes 2000; Hall 1999; Jeske 1999; Kohl 1987a, 1987b; Patterson 1990; Peregrine 1992, 2000). Cores are defined as those areas that possessed higher degrees of technological sophistication, more developed specialization, more “capital accumulation,” and stronger state-centered ideology relative to other communities in an interconnected system (Frank 1993; Rowlands 1987: 4).

The WST approach gained traction in archaeological circles in part because it forces a focus on the regional context within which political centralization occurs. In fact, some scholars essentially see WST as shorthand for any approach that acknowledges the importance of networks of interaction. Frank (1999: 293), for example, argues that a world system is present when there are systematic connections between places and “what happened here cannot be understood without taking account of what then or previously happened there.” Typically, political centralization is seen to emerge out of the bonds of dependency that are developed through control over various types of resources (Urban and Schortman 1999). In fact, the WST model developed out of a concern with historic instances of interregional dependency, in which a core region exploits its peripheries for raw materials, which are extracted, reprocessed, and then redistributed in an exploitative process of interaction (see Frank 1966; Peregrine 2000; Wallerstein 1974; Jennings 2006). In general, a world system is conceptualized as being economically self-contained (Kuznar 1999) and characterized by asymmetrical economic and political relationships (Jeske 1999).

Many critiques have been levied against the WST approach to interpreting archaeological contexts of regional interaction, and most applications have involved extensive reworking of the original concept (Schortman and Urban 1992). Some critics emphasize that the flow of prestige goods in regional integration undermines certain central tenets of the original WST model (Schneider 1977). While this has led some to reject the approach, others have attempted to adjust the concept to accommodate different kinds of interdependence (Peregrine 2000; Blanton et al. 1996). Still others likewise challenge the importance of asymmetric exchange to world system interactions while nevertheless retaining the general model (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1991). In contrast, critics who argue that world system approaches ignore the “lived experience” of “knowledgeable actors” (Morris 1999: 63) and the importance of local agency have tended to reject the WST model as inadequate for explaining interregional interactions (e.g., Stein 1999a, 1999b).

Despite its many problematic elements, WST’s traction in archaeological research, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, had the significant

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effect of highlighting two important characteristics of political topographies. First, some communities are, in fact, more politically developed and influential than others and are central nodes in interregional interaction. Although their significance can be understood only within the broader regional context within which they sit, these political cores are critical foci of research. Conversely, WST approaches have also had the important consequence of directing research toward the political peripheries that might otherwise be neglected (Algaze 2005; Kuznar 1999).

Archaeological research on political topography often relies on an understanding of associations based on the extent and variability of “archaeological cultures.” Although rarely discussed explicitly in terms of centers and peripheries, the geographical distribution of “archaeological cultures” as defined by a particular suite of characteristics is often assumed to correlate with the extent of political control or influence. Archaeological cultures are potentially problematic when reified or accepted uncritically, especially in regions that have traditionally been considered “peripheral” to political cores or that have not been explored extensively for historiographic reasons. Nevertheless, when clearly defined, they are necessary for our discussion as they reflect important interconnections in the past (Bashkow 2004; Flad and Chen 2006).

### Political Peripheries at the Analytical Center

Despite the importance of identifying and investigating political centers, and the fundamental necessity of examining archaeological cultures, a myopic focus on these aspects of landscape ignores or marginalizes areas that do not clearly connect to a discourse on political development. An antidote to this tendency is an intentional focus on areas that are politically peripheral.

As mentioned, WST perspectives have forced scholars to consider broader regions as opposed to focusing on a single society, and this has had the benefit of directing research toward otherwise neglected regions (Algaze 2005; Feinman 1999; Kuznar 1999). Nevertheless, many studies of nonbounded regions, including WST approaches, remain centered on political topographies and the influence of political centers. Justin Jennings has usefully characterized this center bias as the “radial model” of interregional interactions between cores and peripheries (Jennings 2006: 347). The effect of this bias is that even though some scholars emphasize negotiated peripherality (Morris 1999), margins (Sherratt 1993), incorporation (Hall 1986), and similar processes, politically peripheral regions are typically positioned as areas exploited by cores in an



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asymmetrical relationship. The cores still matter most. WST research that implies something more specific than “any kind of interpolity interaction” (Parkinson and Galaty 2007: 117) remains structured either by an assumption that political and economic cores coincide or by an intent to describe economic practices in terms of the political topography.

Other approaches to regional interaction attempt to avoid this political bias by avoiding notions of centrality altogether. For example, research on interaction spheres (Caldwell 1964; Chang 1986; Lamberg-Karlovsky 2012; Shelach 2001) eschews the identification of centers, at least in principle, and is decidedly interregional in focus. The interaction sphere paradigm, which was originally introduced in the context of the Hopewellian world in North America where connections across cultural traditions led to innovations and the emergence of a more unified tradition (Caldwell 1964), is unsatisfying, however, because it presents a static model for regional interaction that does not address change, is often too vague to be useful in understanding regional landscapes, and does not specify the nature of interactions that result in regional connections.

An alternative is found in approaches to regional landscape that do not delegate primacy entirely to individuals and communities that are central to political topographies but instead draw attention to those that are politically peripheral. These include studies that focus on trade networks and roads, distribution patterns of natural resources, religious sites, and natural features that may have created salient symbolic topographies. Significantly, the extent of a trading network rarely coincides with a political core's region of influence.

Similarly, approaches to regional interaction that examine geographies of dispersal, migration, and the transformation or creation of social identities show that these processes are related to topographies that do not neatly coincide with the distribution patterns of political power. This disconnect has been demonstrated by studies of colonialism (Gosden 2004; Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002; Stein 2005a), diasporas (Chen 2007; Dominguez 2002; Dommelen 2005; Spence 2005; Stein 2002), and identity formation (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995; Jenkins 1996). Colonies form through emigration and subjugation or economic control from a political core's control (Stein 2005b: 10). They are, therefore, intimately tied to networks of political power, yet can be understood only as a phenomenon located on the political periphery. Diasporas comprise more politically diffuse bonds of association among people with strong ties to a homeland, which may or may not be politically coherent (Clifford 1994). In some cases, these are tied directly to political cores, but they may also involve the development of imagined communities and invented traditions (Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).



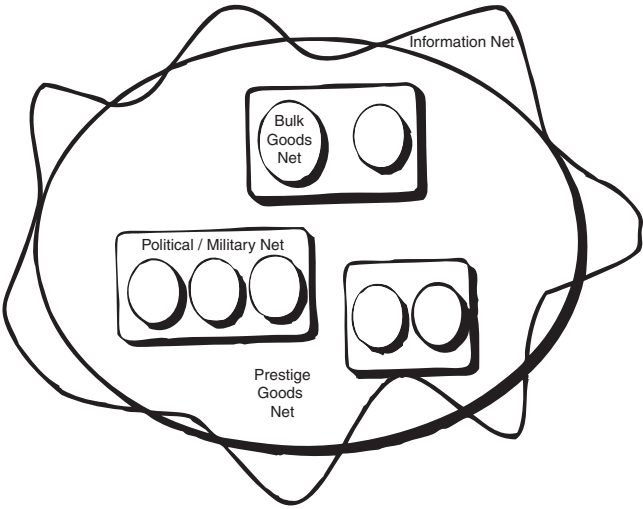


Figure 1.1. Heuristic model of “spatial boundaries of world systems.” (Redrawn after Hall 2000.)

Critical to the notion of diaspora are a location outside the cultural core and juxtaposition between individuals and groups with contrasting social identities. Boundaries and peripheries are crucial to the construction and persistence of identity because interaction between groups can reinforce differences (Barth 1969; Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995; Jenkins 1996).

In fact, some WST research has drawn attention to the noncoincidence of overlapping networks of interaction. Specifically, Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997: 54) and Hall (2000: 240) recognize that though (political) core areas exert control or influence over their peripheries, they do so in different ways according to the mode of interaction. They conceptualize this pattern as a set of overlapping “spatial boundaries.” Accordingly, the degree of control over or integration of political and military activity will not be the same as that of bulk-goods exchange, prestige-goods distribution, or information exchange (see Figure 1.1).

This approach implicitly recognizes that multiple modes of practice define regional interactions. Nevertheless, its focus on a politically defined and economically powerful core means that explanations remain driven by the concerns, actions, and institutions situated in the center of the politically defined topography and radiating outward (Jennings 2006). In contrast, research on the crosscutting concepts of borders, frontiers, and boundaries has brought the political periphery to the fore. This is apparent in contemporary geographies of sovereignty and borders (Agamben 1998 [1995]; Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Sturgeon 2005)

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as well as research on ancient landscapes (Morris 1999; Parker 2006; Sherratt 1993). Recognizing the fluid nature of sovereign control and the heterogeneity of political landscapes, these studies emphasize the potential plasticity of political boundaries and the variable ways in which peripheralized populations react and relate to political landscapes. Borderlands, boundaries, and frontiers are instead conceptualized as important zones for social change, interaction, and ethnogenesis, among other processes (Elton 1996; Hodder 1982; Kopytoff 1987).

Political peripheries have been defined using a number of related but subtly different terms, including boundary, border, frontier, and borderland (Anderson 1996; Donnan and Wilson 1994; Green and Perlman 1985; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Parker 2006; Rösler and Wendl 1999). Bradley Parker (2006: 79) cogently argues for a distinction to be made among these similar concepts. For him, *boundary* is the most general, indicating unspecific and general bounds or limits. In contrast, *borders* for Parker are fixed, linear divisions based solely on political or administrative units. Incidentally, David Anthony (2007: 102) has recently proposed that these two terms be used in precisely the opposite fashion. For Anthony, *border* is a neutral term with no fixed meaning, whereas *boundary* corresponds to a “sharply defined border that limits movement in some way” (Anthony 2007: 102). These two scholars are identifying similar distinctions in the concepts but have chosen the same terms to represent different meanings. Here we follow Parker, if only because the colloquial use of *border* seems more strongly to suggest a fixed edge.

*Frontiers* are transitional zones of interpenetration that are “porous to . . . movement, and very possibly dynamic and moving” (Anthony 2007: 102). Frontiers may be composed of various types of boundaries that overlap (Elton 1996; see also Thompson and Lamar 1981: 7; Kristof 1959; Lattimore 1962; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Rice 1998). Finally, Parker defines *borderlands* as problematic regions “around or between political or cultural entities where geographic, political, demographic, cultural, and economic circumstances or processes may interact to create borders or frontiers” (Parker 2006: 80). Borders consequently emerge in borderlands that are zones of interaction between multiple known political entities, whereas frontiers are defined as external to or on the edges of a single cultural or political core.

Parker’s (2006) subsequent discussion of “borderland matrices” identifies the potential discontinuity between various components of landscapes (Figure 1.2). Building on Hugh Elton’s (1996) recognition that the Roman frontier involved a complex matrix of overlapping political, economic, and cultural boundaries, or “boundary sets,” Parker