

## Book Review: Way Out of the Maze of History

Olga Gorodetskaya. *Xia Shang Zhou: Cong Shenhua Dao Shishi* [Xia, Shang, Zhou Dynasties: from Myths to Historical Facts]. 537 pages, 150 b&w illustrations. 2013. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Press; 978-7-5325-6759-1 hardback ¥148.

A few months ago, I learnt that Professor Olga Gorodetskaya is going to publish her new book, *Xia Shang Zhou: Cong Shenhua Dao Shishi* (literally Xia, Shang, Zhou Dynasties: from Myths to Historical Facts). Now the long waiting has come to an end and a 1-inch thick book is sitting on my desk. It is affecting when I look back at the research history of the formation of Chinese civilization and the exploration of the early historical era, a few generations of scholars has spent their entire career lives in solving the puzzle. I have been luckily to take part in this challenging quest, and I truly understand that it has never been an easy task. The history of the Three Dynasties has been hiding in the fog. As our understanding to the topic accumulate, so do our misunderstandings, bias and assumptions grow. But after reading this book, I feel relieved, just like walked through the maze, solved the puzzle, and the truth revealed in front of me.

This book is based on a large amount of research materials. It comes with 70-page of bibliography, which included references from ancient to recent; and considered the rise of Chinese civilization in a macroscopic perspective. The author has taken a multi-disciplinary and question-oriented approach in conducting this research. Relevant evidences and theories from historical texts, Archaeology, Anthropology and Natural Science have all been employed to solve the historical puzzle. Her insight leads her away from the disciplinary bias, historical preconceptions and social prepossession, and helps her focuses on the basic questions by following the most fundamental development pattern of civilizations in human history. The answer she gave in the book is extraordinary; nonetheless it is persuasive.

At the very beginning, this book is motivated by the author's observations the cultural continuity of Erlitou, Zhengzhou Sheng City and Yanshi Sheng City (hereafter refer these two cities as Zheng-Yan); and the differences between them and Yinxu. During her research and writing of this book, the greatest difficulty and challenge come from academic paradigm and "common senses" formed long time ago. In 1917, Wang Guowei has confirmed that the king list of Yin written in the *Records of the Grand Historian* is mostly agree with the study of oracle bones excavated from Xiaotun. His study has two important influences: (1) it increased the Chinese scholars' confidence that the written history of the Three Dynasties is accurate; and (2) made the "double-evidence methodology" popular in the studies of History and Archaeology in China. In the later study of Xia-Shang Dynasty, the written records have become the primary evidence and the archaeological materials become secondary. Based on the believe that if the king list of Yin in the *Records of the Grand Historian* is believable, the king list of Xia in it would also believable;

people has started to look for archaeological remains of Xia Dynasty in the China Central Plain according to their understanding and faith to the written records. When the archaeological site of Erlitou was discovered, many scholars have believed that the site belongs to “Xia Culture”, as the geographical location and the archaeological dating of the site match with the written records describing Xia Dynasty. And the archaeological site of Yanshi is believed to be a city of Early to Mid-Shang Dynasty with the similar reasoning. Nowadays, these believed conclusions have written in school textbooks, and formed a rigid paradigm and “common sense” among people.

Benefit from the author’s rich experience in the study of formation of Chinese classic texts and cross-cultural comparing study, she has an insight that those written records describing the “history” before Qin Dynasty could be recognized as “myth”. She has emphasized that myths create and comprehend “historical facts”, these are patterns found in historical studies of many places of the world, and there is no exception in China - Yellow Emperor, Zhuanxu, Yao, Shun and Yu – are some stories of this kind. The stories of Chengtang defending Xia, and Wuwang defending Shang described by those transmitted texts (opposite to written texts discovered or unearthed archaeologically), are very similar, this is clearly a kind of mythologized historical structure. Historical myths have a key difference when compared to myths without historical meaning; historical myths demonstrate a civilization/state’s ideology, and interpretations of its formation, growth, failure-and-victory and hero-and-enemy. Many myths of Shang and Zhou Dynasties in surviving texts were not written in texts until Eastern Zhou Dynasty. And based on those oral and fragmented written records, scholars in Warring States Period, Qin and Han Dynasties have tried to understand the development of earlier history, and to write historical works. The writers of the time would have written down the stories in a form that, inevitably, based on their backgrounds and understandings. Although, transmitted texts are not wholly fabricated, they have their own special internal values and political purposes; there are difference between them and objective historical facts. In other words, transmitted texts cannot represent objective facts, and they only show political dogmas, which originated from Zhou Dynasty and matured in Han Dynasty. This unitary historical view of the Three Dynasties was the most appropriate view under the ideology of “a unified state” for the Han Empire.

Therefore, the study of the Three Dynasties must overcome and break through the gap of knowledge and thought generated by ideological unification made during Qin and Han Dynasties, and try our best to reconstruct some key components of history and culture of the Three Dynasties. In this kind of study, especially historical research before Yin Shang, we should consider those written records as metaphoric description, and avoid trapped by ideological bias of the time. Instead of struggling on the literal meanings of the words, we shall focus on the structural relationship behind all those descriptions. In comparing transmitted texts with archaeological materials, texts are second-hand data while archaeological one is first-hand. Thus, we shall remember to use archaeological materials as primary evidences and use texts as supporting evidences.

In some transmitted texts dominated Xia-Shang Dynasty Studies, the spatial concept of the texts are adopted, and used as the key reference in forming corresponding relationship between archaeological cultures and ethnic groups represented in texts. However, in spatial analysis, the concepts of center and peripheral are relative; and as the time changes, center can drifted and/or reversed. If we look into transmitted texts, especially those trying to interpret the spatial concept of early myths, we will found that all texts are placed in the spatial background and setting of empires established since Zhou Dynasty, centered itself at Zhengzhou-Luoyang area, and identify Shandong area as Eastern Yi District; Hubei and Hunan area as Nanman District. Two thousand years of “Zheng-Luo Centrism” (the tradition of viewing Zhengzhou-Luoyang as the center of China in history) has led to misunderstanding in researches of ancient cultures and history. In response to the situation, the author suggests that the concept of “Central Plain” shall take its

geographical meaning – plain area in the center. It is a board plain reaching Yellow River at the north; Daba Mountain at the east; Dabie Mountains at the west; and the southern edge of Dongting Plain. This vast plain is ideal for agriculture, and the lower reaches of Han River would be the geographical center of the Plain.

In the last decade, many archaeological discovery in the Yangtze River basin and Yan Mountains area, especially a large number of prehistoric large settlements, walled settlements and burials, have questioned the traditional presumption of “Zheng-Luo Centrism”. Because of this, different scholars, such as Su Bingqi, Yan Wenming, and Fei Xiaotong, have proposed different models, but all of them agree that the Chinese civilization rises from multi-origin. The only question left here is “how they unified to form a major civilization in China?”

In order to answer this question, the author approaches from a wider perspective of world history, the geographical locations of all other early civilizations in Asia and Africa were born in the humid subtropical climate zone, and located between 26° to 32° north latitude. Area further north started the civilization process only in later period of time. Moreover, the origins of agriculture can also be found in the same area where early civilizations were formed.

Based on the above observations, the Yellow River basin is less likely to be the area forming early civilization, but more likely to be a major route of transportation for different groups of people during the expansion of civilizations. In considering the development of archaeological cultures, only those archaeological cultures located in the middle reaches of Yangtze River basin have formed a continuous cultural lineage. People in this area has devoted in rice agriculture as their major subsistence strategy from the very beginning. They have entered the Copper Age and Bronze Age in the Qujialing period and Shijiahe period respectively. Multi-state and trade networks were formed in the area along the swamps and rivers, which demonstrated the beginning of the earliest civilization process in the East Asia, that similar to the development of Sumer.

This book also argues that Qujialing Culture and Shijiahe Culture have already reached the southern bank of Yellow River middle reaches, this situation last until the end of Erlitou-Panlongcheng period.

Panlongcheng is generally considered as “the southern city of Shang people”. However, the author, after studying the latest archaeological findings, suggests that Panlongcheng was the biggest and richest city-state controlled many different kinds of important resources of the area. The material culture of Panlongcheng had a lot of characteristics developed from Shijiahe Culture, it shall not be considered as a result of cultural diffusion from Erligang. Panlongcheng was possibly the largest center of centralized multi-state civilization. This civilization may called “Shang”, or other name they would call themselves, but it matches with the “Shang civilization” before Yinxu was built as a capital at north. The person named “Tang” written in *Chuci* and *Yue Jueshu* maybe a hero of the south. Based on the archaeological findings that Shijiahe declined while Panlongcheng rose, the story of Chengtang defending Xia may just telling this hidden fact. “Shang” or “Tang” maybe one of the dynasty in this Chu Civilization, or it could be referred as “South Shang” (different from the royal house of Yin Shang), with influence reaching Zheng-Luo area. This does not mean that Panlongcheng and Yanshi were cities of the same state, they might be different individual states but belonged to one larger civilization. This civilization had a center at the Jiangnan Plain, and Zheng-Luo was under the influence of this center.

In about 3,500BP, ethnic groups from the north came down to south and established Yinxu. After about another hundred years, they defeated Panlongcheng and claimed themselves as “Shang”. Slowly, they adsorbed the stories of “South Shang” for their own, in order to justify their legitimacy and to claim as the inheritor of the previous local political power. Since then, the original earliest civilization of Jiangnan Plain was buried in written texts of later time.

The author believes that there were many examples in world history. The hagiography of a loser often becomes the glorified history of a victor. In Western Asia, the Amorites borrowed the history of the Sumerian, made the Sumerian's ancestral kings to be their own holy king; the Hittites, in turn, borrowed history of Babylon, and merged the histories of these two groups of people again, and complicated biographies of their ancestral kings. The complication had not solved well, until recent archaeological findings and researches cleaned it up. The victory of ethnic groups from the north in China not only allowed them to control the land and resources of the south, but also owned their achievements and stories of heroes.

The Great Wall has witnessed the history of cultural exchanges and invasions of southern agricultural civilizations and nomadic-warlike civilizations. As the author suggests, the invasions from the north, would have started in about 2,000BC, when the climate became cooler. At this time nomadic-warlike parties from Asian Steppe invaded the south frequently. The middle reaches of Yellow River were the north-south dividing line; Erlitou and Zheng-Yan were the northern strongholds of the agricultural civilization of the south. However, the defense was finally broke by Yin Shang royal house, with their horse chariots and military power. After established their capital Yinxu, they occupied the Central Plain, and adopted a sedentary lifestyle. They merged their culture with the southern cultures; borrowed their written characters and created bone script. Yin Shang was actually the earliest empire of East Asia; it built upon the successes of the preceding cultures of East Asia, but also started a new chapter of East Asia civilization.

The author has avoided bias and paradigm formed in the tradition historical studies of the Three Dynasties and the ideology of a unified empire, appeared since Qin Dynasty. She approached the question critically, focuses on archaeological findings, and pay attention to all other relevant theories, discipline and data. It is an excellent attempt and a new perspective to the study of early civilization of China. The view of this book is macroscopic, an argument of this scale has to build upon many smaller arguments with some details yet to be polished. Nevertheless, the academic discussions put forward by this book; and future historical and archaeological researches and findings concerning the topic, would certainly benefit our understandings of the Three Dynasties and the early civilization of China.(2,227 words)

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