

BOOK REVIEW

## *Life and Afterlife in Ancient China*

By Jessica Rawson. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023.  
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In *Life and Afterlife in Ancient China*, Jessica Rawson examines eleven tombs and one burial pit scattered throughout what are now the central and northern regions of the People's Republic of China. The earliest of these sites dates to the third millennium BCE, and the rest are all pre-imperial, with the exception of the mausoleum of the First Emperor of Qin (259–210 BCE), who ruled first as king of Qin and then as emperor after 221 BCE. In a manner reminiscent of other object-based studies published in recent years,<sup>1</sup> and building on her decades of research and work in the field, Rawson devotes a chapter to each site. Readers unfamiliar with the period Rawson discusses will welcome her engaging overview of a huge range of material. Some of her claims, and the use of certain definitions and categories, should be read with caution. Nonetheless, her interpretations offer provocative food for thought for people seeking to make connections and comparisons with other places and times, including but not limited to later periods of China's history.

While each of the book's chapters focuses on a separate archaeological site, Rawson offers not excavation summaries but rather interpretive explorations, focusing on objects or features that allow comparisons across time and space. For instance, while serving as the main subject matter only in the first chapter, on the Liangzhu tomb at Fanshan, nephrite jade makes an appearance in almost every subsequent chapter. Other than in detailed catalogs, jade rarely receives this level of scholarly attention. From tracing the sources of the precious stones to analyzing the many cultural forces evident in their design, Rawson's engagement with jade is a welcome addition to existing material histories of early China. As a counterpart to jade, Rawson also presents a complicated material history of gold—including the technologies involved in making gold artifacts, their intersection with other materials like textiles, and their presence in tombs as signs of cross-cultural interaction. While the functional alignment of jade with Yellow River states and gold with the northern steppe peoples is at times overly schematic, the care with which Rawson attends to the histories of finding, making, and using these precious materials helps us navigate the complexity of a rich archaeological landscape.

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<sup>1</sup>The most famous example is Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

In addition to jade and gold, each chapter establishes other material threads that weave through the entire book. Rawson consistently draws attention to the geographic and climate conditions of the sites in question, provides details on tomb architecture relevant to the period, and traces the history of technology behind the materials found at the sites. Some of the most interesting observations along these lines appear in her analysis of Lord Bai's circular tomb, constructed from clay imitations of stone boulders (chapter 8), which signals an "obsession with stone" (p. 209) and an impressive organization of labor forces to manage and produce this rare instance of material translation. Another enticing connection that Rawson draws out is the materiality of beads—meaning the different materials from which they were made and what that says about their origins and the way they marked social status and identity—from the tombs of Yu Bo (chapter 5), Lord of Rui (chapter 6), and the Majiayuan warrior (chapter 11). We also consistently read about the functions of buried animals and artifacts, specifically as they pertain to feasting, horses, livestock and animal husbandry, and war. For example, Rawson skillfully traces the formal and functional evolution of chariots, from those that Ya Chang (chapter 3) would have commanded in battle to the display chariot found in the Majiayuan warrior tomb (chapter 11). Along with chariots, Rawson also returns to the horses that pulled them: diet, tack, and the indispensable role of horses in warfare among the living and in the afterlife. Across all the chapters, the recurrence of materials and motifs and the themes and functions that can be drawn from them bring coherence to a riotous array of objects, making *Death and the Afterlife in China* a valuable resource for historians and other scholars outside of archaeology and art history who are interested in the stories that materials and artifacts might tell. The book could be equally valuable for students, since on an undergraduate syllabus any one of the chapters could open a window into the complexity of early Chinese tombs.

Although these threads emerge throughout the chapters, the sheer richness of Rawson's archaeological data poses a larger question: do all of these sites and objects, scattered throughout the Yellow and Yangtze River basins and covering nearly three millennia, connect together? Can we move from tracing shared materials to a larger narrative that explains the meaning of these connections? For Rawson, the answer is "yes," and she tells an overall story of integration, driven by the cultures and states of the Yellow River. While the traditions of other groups persisted, they all "were attracted to and eventually did join the political power bases and religious frameworks of the central states" (p. xxxiv). For Rawson, these Yellow River "power bases" and "religious frameworks" were defined by three features: the "ancestral cult, a universe of correlations and analogies, and a shared [written] script" (p. xxxiii). These three practices form Rawson's definition of "China," though the "ancestral cult" is clearly the most important for her, since "correlations" and even writing largely fall by the wayside as her discussion unfolds.

Rawson, understandably, does not linger too long on the question of "China," an endlessly complicated topic that will probably never be resolved, continued scholarly effort notwithstanding.<sup>2</sup> It is nonetheless striking that *Life and Afterlife in Ancient China* effectively presents archaeological history within the traditional framework of dynastic history, with the ancestor-worshipping, text-writing cultures of Yellow River "civilization" in the driver's seat, despite Rawson's claim that her sites and objects

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., Ge Zhaoguang, *What is China? Territory, Ethnicity, Culture, & History*, translated by Michael Gibbs Hill (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

“offer an alternative history to the early texts” (p. 361). Indeed, the chronological framework of the book is structured around categories from traditional historiography, with the second and third of the book’s “parts” cleaving at 700 BCE, a nod to the beginning of the Eastern Zhou period. Also relevant is the decision to end with the First Emperor of Qin’s tomb, for Rawson “the ultimate expression of oneness” (p. 356) and a material reflection of northern China’s drive to integrate and unify. Just because a narrative is traditional, of course, does not mean it is entirely wrong, and we can hardly deny that integration did occur. Rawson’s claim that other groups were “attracted” to the Yellow River states and “eventually did join” them, however, should be tempered by a recognition that the process was actually quite violent, contingent, and marked by resistance. Moreover, other cultures continued to have a deep impact on early Chinese politics, culture, and religion. This fact might have been more apparent if the book had concluded with Qin’s successors, the rulers and elites of the Western Han, affiliated as they were with the “southern” culture of Chu.<sup>3</sup>

The “early texts” themselves are part of the problem, one that is perhaps unavoidable. After all, received texts focus on the Yellow River states and not the pastoralists to the north and west, who, Rawson shows, played an integral role in cultural production during this vast time period. Indeed, the impact of these nomadic groups from the steppe, and the function of the Loess Plateau as a zone that mediated between them and Yellow River states further south, form constant themes in the book. Nonetheless, Rawson’s discussion of nomadic groups occasionally falls prey to the biases of received texts. For instance, much of the discussion in chapter 7 of the seventh century BCE tomb from Yuhuangmiao is predicated on the idea that the interred man was a member of the “Mountain Rong,” a group described in received texts but absent from the tomb itself. Rawson herself admits it is an “arbitrary” identification, but one that is nonetheless “convenient” (p. 182). It is “convenient,” of course, because we have no texts produced by the “Rong,” “Di,” or other steppe groups. Rawson’s recourse to such categories from received texts is perhaps understandable, especially given the huge amount of material she covers. Nonetheless, that choice might leave readers wondering whether a purely object-based history would tell different stories, not refracted through early Chinese texts, about the lifestyles and afterlives of the steppe peoples.

One of the greatest strengths of the book is Rawson’s choice of sites. Each site offers a rich body of artefactual material that problematizes Sinocentric approaches to early China studies to reveal diverse cultural origins and actors. Even if the book’s promise of an alternative perspective less centered on the Yellow River basin is not entirely realized, *Life and Afterlife in Ancient China* provides plenty of material for students and specialists who, in Rawson’s words, see “differences in material life” as “invitations to interact, learn and prosper” (p. 364).

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of the spread of Chu cultural elements in elite Han burial practice, see Huang Yijun, “Chang’an’s Funerary Culture and the Core Han Culture,” *Chang’an 26 BCER: An Augustan Age in China*, edited by Michael Nylan and Griet Vankeerberghen (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 153–74.