

States of Theory and States of Asia: Regional Perspectives on States in Asia



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Valid use of the Chinese data for comparative purposes must depend on valid understandings of those data in terms of their internal order. It is this tension between, on the one hand, being truthful to the ever-increasing Chinese data base that requires constantly renewed efforts in its own study and, on the other hand, trying to conform such data to purported universal patterns already formulated elsewhere in the world without the benefit of Chinese experience that has characterized many important controversies in Chinese social historiography.

—Chang 1983:574–575

WHY HAVE ASIAN STATES been so marginal in the construction of Euro-American views of complex societies? In recent years, archaeological models for the origin and operation of complex social and political organization have virtually ignored evidence from Asia east of Mesopotamia, except as case studies for the elucidation of models constructed elsewhere. I suggest that this question has at least two answers. First, I suggest that the historical construction of complex societies in Asia has worked to define Asian states as a unique type and to separate them from non-Asian states. This historical construction has its roots in visions of state organization that date back to the late nineteenth century but that have never been fully abandoned. Thus, this notion of difference has itself fundamentally shaped our views of complex societies. Second, I suggest that the current position of Asian studies on the margins of Americanist archaeology follows from the too-common practice of using models constructed without reference to (or with minimal reference to) Asia and then fitting Asian data to these models.

The solution to this dilemma is similarly twofold. First, we must recognize the historical construction of Asian states that is part of Western intellectual traditions. More than this, however, we must begin to appreciate the archaeological record of complex societies in Asia on its own terms and not use this record simply to illustrate archaeological perspectives developed elsewhere. The contributors to this volume have as a goal not simply the engagement of data on states in Asia with existing models of the state, but also as Chang (above) advo-

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cates, the understanding of those data in terms of their internal order. This understanding, we hope, will lead ultimately to the refinement and even redefinition of those models and thus to a more comprehensive archaeological view of complex societies.

“SELF” AND “OTHER” IN THE HISTORY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

European and American archaeology have always focused on Europe and the Americas, for obvious reasons. It may be less evident, however, why other areas with long histories of colonialism and interventionism have had differential importance in the construction of archaeological views about complex societies. In part, archaeological explanations have followed archaeological exploration. For example, the current debate among archaeologists of the Harappan or Indus Tradition (Shaffer 1991) about its cultural-evolutionary “status” as either a state or a chiefdom (e.g., Fairservice 1967, 1986; Jacobson 1987) might never have arisen had archaeological research focused first on the Harappan and later on Egypt and Mesopotamia, and not the reverse. In this debate, demonstrated differences between the Harappan and such early state “exemplars” as Mesopotamia and Egypt have led to questions about the status of Harappan society as a state society. This history of research is not, however, simply a history of chance discoveries but rather reflects the fundamental interests of European and American archaeologists, and the colonial history that has shaped contemporary Western archaeology.

Asian states have not always played such a peripheral role in the construction of Western views of the past. On the contrary, constructions of Asia helped to shape the contemporary Western intellectual world’s notions of itself (see, e.g., discussions in Asad 1975; Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993; Dirks 1992; Inden 1990; Said 1978). This role of Asia as a foil for the definition of European and American identities has, to a certain extent, persisted in more popular depictions of Asian pre- and protohistory, as I discuss below. Thus, I suggest that such “antique” notions as Oriental Despotism and the Asiatic Mode of Production have contributed in a fundamental way to the development of archaeological theory and that the current isolation of Asian studies from the mainstream of Americanist archaeology is only a temporary phenomenon, one which in a very small way this volume attempts to remedy.

SEEKING THE EUROPEAN SELF: SOUTHWEST ASIA PASSES THE TORCH

Archaeological research in the Old World has been intimately connected with European notions about the origins of its own “civilization” or state society. The putative origins of European culture in the classical worlds of Greece and Rome prompted a fascination with Mediterranean antiquities and archaeology (cf. Trigger 1989). If Europe received the “spark” of civilization from the Mediterranean, then the Mediterranean received it from Southwest Asia (Trigger 1989:160–161). This thesis, that Southwest Asia passed the torch of civilization first to the Mediterranean and then to Europe, was best developed by Childe. As he wrote in *New Light on the Most Ancient East* (originally [1934] subtitled *The Oriental Prelude to European History*):

Barely a thousand years ago Scotland and the rest of northern Europe were sunk in the night of illiteracy and barbarism. A thousand years earlier and history's light shines on our dark continent merely from a few points on the shores of the Mediterranean. And in the next millennium these points flicker out one by one. . . . But one thread is clearly discernible running through the dark and tangled tale of these prehistoric Europeans: the westward spread, adoption, and transformation of the inventions of the Orient. . . . For on the Nile and in Mesopotamia the clear light of written history illuminates our path for fully fifty centuries, and looking down that vista we already descry at its farther end ordered government, urban life, writing, and conscious art. . . . The prehistoric and protohistoric archaeology of the Ancient East is therefore an indispensable prelude to the true appreciation of European prehistory (Childe 1952: 1–2).

Although radiocarbon dating demolished Childe's substantive developments of this theme (Renfrew 1973), the archaeological focus on Mesopotamia as the center, *par excellence*, of early state development and as a baseline against which to compare developments in other areas has continued (Adams 1971:591). The more recent work of archaeologists such as Redman (1978:6) indicates the enduring quality of *ex oriente lux* for Europeans, ". . . it will remain unquestioned that the early developments in the Near East had a greater effect on the nature of Western civilization than analogous developments anywhere else in the world. Direct historical connections link the later, historic empires and peoples of the Near East with the early Mediterranean civilizations of Greece and Rome that are acknowledged in many respects to be ancestral to European civilization." If European self-definition lies behind much of the focus on Mesopotamian studies, then what of Asian states? I suggest that the dominant constructions of Asian complex society in the last century also reflect to a significant degree a concern with the definition of European civilization through their role as "alternates" to the "basic" constructions built from Mesopotamia westward.

THE RISE TO CIVILIZATION

Asian states played an important, if distant, role in the construction of late nineteenth and early twentieth century views of progressive cultural evolution. Although the natural character of humankind may have been conceived as progressive toward the goal of civilization, Asian societies were seen as presenting a problematic counter-condition. The reasons for this are complex and well beyond the scope of this introduction (see discussions in, for example, Boon 1982; Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993; Cohen 1990; Dirks 1992; Inden 1990). Thus, the existence of Southwest Asian, Mediterranean, and European complex societies needed no explanation other than the natural expression of genius (and diffusion). Contemporary societies in Asia, on the other hand, were seen either as degenerated products of former (derived) greatness (consider, for example, Basham's [1954] *Wonder That Was India*) brought about by Western influence or as aberrant varieties of civilization. In South Asia, for example, British scholars defined the Buddhist (Early Historic) period as that of maximal achievement of Indian civilization, giving particular critical acclaim to Gandharan art, which has obvious connections to Classical Greece (see Chakrabarti 1988a, 1988b). These "Asiatic" states were defined in opposition to European views of their own political structures. Asian states were archaic, coercive, and despotic, while European

states were modern, democratic, and benevolent (and see Kohl 1987:5). This opposition, as discussed below, can be traced in part to the ideological legitimization of colonial rule, and its influence extended even into parts of Asia not brought under direct colonial domination.

COERCION IN ASIA: NOT LIKE US

Wittfogel began his well-known study of "the Asiatic state" by wondering why no one had, up to then (1957, see also Wittfogel 1971), systematically explored the nature of total power, as exemplified by Asian states. His introduction is worth citing at length:

When in the 16th and 17th centuries, in consequence of the commercial and industrial revolution, Europe's trade and power spread to the far corners of the earth, a number of keen-minded Western travellers and scholars made an intellectual discovery comparable to the great geographical exploits of the period. Contemplating the civilizations of the Near East, India, and China, they found significant in all of them a combination of institutional features which existed neither in classical antiquity nor in medieval or modern Europe. The classical economists eventually conceptualized this discovery by speaking of a specific "Oriental" or "Asiatic" society.

The common substance in the various Oriental societies appeared most conspicuously in the despotic strength of their political authority. Of course, tyrannical governments were not unknown in Europe: the rise of the capitalist order coincided with the rise of absolutist states. But critical observers saw the Eastern absolutism was definitely more comprehensive and more oppressive than its western counterpart. To them "Oriental" despotism presented the harshest form of total power (1957:1).

Why had no one before Wittfogel examined this system in detail? As he put it, Europeans of that "fortunate age . . . confidently expected the rising sun of civilization to dispel the last vestiges of despotism that clouded the path of progress" (1957:2). It is ironic that it was European fascism, and specifically Nazi Germany, that impelled Wittfogel to pursue this line of inquiry.

Wittfogel's work has proved to be of enduring interest to archaeologists and is cited in virtually every introductory text in discussions of early complex societies. Equally ironic, the model of Oriental Despotism, which stressed coercion and exploitation in the operation of state power, later came to be transformed in functionalist models of state origin that stressed the adaptive nature of states and the "services" (such as management) that elites provided for nonelites (or for society as a whole) as being instrumental in the development of complex societies.

Oriental Despotism was built on a deeper stratum of views in which Asian societies were depicted as fundamentally different from those of the West. First among such views was Marx's concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production (Bailey and Llobera 1981; Krader 1975; O'Leary 1989). This classification was part of an attempt to come to terms with the newly perceived differences between European historical experience and those of other parts of the world (cf. Claessen and Skalnik 1978; Godelier 1978), particularly the colonized countries of Asia. These many non-European histories were homogenized and combined into a single model of political economy taken as characteristic of the "Orient."

The historical and quasi-ethnographic sources used by Marx to construct the Asiatic mode were based on colonial accounts of Asia, particularly British colonial accounts of India (Krader 1975:7). O'Leary (1989:263) noted that Marx made quite selective use of his limited sources, which included traveler's tales, British parliamentary reports, and historical works by British administrators. These colonial constructions of "traditional" Indian society were aimed at legitimating colonial rule and facilitating revenue collection. One of the pervasive themes of this colonial legacy of myth-making was that of the "village republic," a term coined by Mark Wilks, a British colonial officer stationed in South India. In his history of Mysore, Wilks depicted Indian villages as self-sustaining, self-governing, isolated, stable, closed, and consisting of a traditional, passive populace (Krader 1975:62-67). This view, although not supported by archaeological, historical, or contemporary evidence, has proved to be both persistent and pervasive in discussions of Indian villages (see Ludden 1985 and O'Leary 1989 for more discussion) and Asian rural society more generally.

The harshness and caprice of government rule in Asian states was also stressed. As Krader (1975:19) noted, "In the accounts of the European travellers to Asia in the seventeenth century, the Oriental peoples were represented as living either in utter want or luxury and the government of the Orient as despotic, the power of the autocrats who ruled the various countries of Asia being arbitrary, absolute and unbounded." These accounts stressed the passivity of the ruled and the fundamental separation between agricultural communities and state organization (Claessen and Skalnik 1978:8), so that state structures were seen as merely perched atop a more basic stratum of unchanging rural people, values, and practices. Asian rulers were conceived as sole proprietors of the land, with a concomitant absence of private property rights as found in Europe (O'Leary 1989).

Another major feature of the Asiatic Mode of Production (following Krader 1975:120-122) was a low degree of urbanization. The Asiatic city was not thought to possess significant industries but instead existed only for military purposes as a sort of "armed camp" (Marx 1853, cited in Krader 1975:82, and see O'Leary 1989). There was no wage labor and no private ownership of land. In both the Ancient and the Asiatic modes, the production of commodities was not a significant aspect of the economic relations of society, and even within villages there existed a low development of commodity exchange. Because villages were independent "republics," of course there was no specialization of production between villages. Production was directed toward subsistence, with most of the surplus going to the state. With the advent of colonialism, capitalism was brought to Asia, and only with that event, Marx asserted, did Asia enter history (Krader 1975:90-93; O'Leary 1989:267).

Besides stressing the distance and inferiority of the "Oriental" in relation to the European, the assumption of Oriental Despotism served a dual purpose in facilitating and legitimating colonial rule (see Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993). British rule in India, for example, was seen as benign and humane, an improvement over the capriciousness of earlier despots. Thus, constructions of the past served very immediate political goals. As these contexts have disappeared, however, the models have not.

ECHOES OF THE "ASIATIC STATE"

The perception of an almost monotonous continuity and the absence of significant change in Asian complex societies is much more than simply a historical curiosity. Indeed, it remains the orthodox perception of time and process in pre-history and history in India (e.g., Allchin and Allchin 1982:352–354; and see Leach 1990) and many other parts of Asia, leading to, for example, a relatively uncritical use of the direct-historical approach in archaeological interpretation.

The Asiatic Mode of Production was constructed as a stage in an alternate formulation of historical change. In Europe and the Mediterranean, modes of production moved from Primitive to Ancient to Feudal to Capitalist. In precolonial Asia, there were only the primitive and the Asiatic modes. Wittfogel, too, conceived of his study of "stagnant" hydraulic societies as contributing toward a new, multilineal evolution (and see Steward 1955) representing a scientific advance over Boasian relativism (Wittfogel 1957:370). Separate stages or forms for Asia have also been proposed more recently. Friedman and Rowlands (1977:217–224) developed their own concept of the "Asiatic State," a small affair not to be confused, they warn, with the great "oriental despotic empires" (1977:220). Kristiansen (1991:20) suggested that this concept be used (under the rubric "centralized archaic state") as a "second, alternate path to state society, in contrast to decentralized stratified society." Johnson and Earle (1987:247–248) associated "staple finance" (cf. D'Altroy and Earle 1985) with the Asiatic Mode of Production. Thus, Asian states have continued to be set apart. Further, they still are seen as exhibiting specific features such as strong centralized government control (see Morrison and Lycett, this volume).

Echoes of Oriental Despotism persist in archaeological interpretation, as do models that set Asian states apart from complex societies elsewhere. Thus, no matter how often Asian specialists object, textbook presentations (still the major source of information for most American archaeologists) of Asian complex societies persist in representing Asian states as rigid, authoritarian, centralized, and oppressive. The Harappan is an excellent example, because early interpretations by European archaeologists stressing "... the monotonous regularity of a highly-organized community under some strong system of central government, controlling production and distribution and no doubt levying a system of tolls and customs throughout the territory under its rule" (Piggott 1950:136; see also Allchin and Allchin 1982; Wheeler 1968) have persisted in the popular imagination and in secondary sources. Despite a concerted effort on the part of Harappan specialists to demolish these archaic and worse, unfounded, views (see, e.g., Shaffer 1993), students still read, for example, "... archaeologists believe that the cities of Mohenjodaro and Harappa in the Indus Valley were governed by a centralized authority because they show definite signs of city planning. They are both over three miles long; their main streets are laid out in a rectangular grid pattern, and both contain citywide drainage systems" (Haviland 1994:261; contrast Jansen 1979; Shaffer 1993:46).

Still, Asian states are more often invisible in the curriculum. Fagan (1993:166–267), for example, omitted the Indus altogether as a center of early state formation, and his subsequent discussions of models for state origins never mention China. In more than 30 pages of discussion in Hayden (1993:361–419),

Asian states appear only twice: once on a map and in a few sentences on oracle bone divination. Southeast Asia is never mentioned at all. In what may be the most widely read text on world prehistory, Wenke presents a chart depicting a “simplified chronology of South Asian prehistory” (1990:408). This chart is “simplified” indeed—depicting “Aryan invasions” as a possible reason for the decline of Harappan cities, a notion no longer given any serious credence (e.g., Dales 1964; Kenoyer 1991). Further, the only post-Harappan “events” in South Asian prehistory are given as Persian invasions and Alexander the Great! The use of Asian states as poorly sketched comparative cases for models constructed elsewhere continues an intellectual tradition exemplified by such constructions as Oriental Despotism and the Asiatic Mode of Production. Asia is an “other” or alternate form that is to be compared to a more “basic” case. Asia serves as a mirror, helping Europe to define itself.

The constructions of Marx and Wittfogel thus may be placed within a broader context of step-wise cultural evolutionary models, unilineal or multilineal, that have had a substantial impact on archaeology. Despite an ongoing flirtation with diffusionism (below, and see Trigger 1980 for a discussion of how cultural evolutionism and diffusionism could coexist in the work of Childe), then, we can see a tradition of continuing but at times uneasy use of stage classifications in the study of Asian complex societies. The “rungs on a ladder” (cf. Yoffee 1993) schemas of Service (1975) and others (Fried 1967, 1983) have replaced such quaint constructions as “Asiatic society,” and yet a certain amount of unease in applying such models to Asian states persists. This unease, apart from current calls to abandon stage classification (e.g., Dunnell 1980), stems from the fact that many Asian cases do not appear to fit neatly into existing cultural-evolutionary continua. Rather than forcing data into such frameworks, archaeologists of Asia would do well to use their perspective as a vantage point for reevaluating the frameworks themselves (cf. Ferguson 1991).

THE PASSIVE VESSELS

Diffusionist models, which dominated archaeology for much of the twentieth century (cf. Trigger 1989), were based on a premise that humankind possessed a fundamental conservatism and lack of inventiveness, so that “inventions” such as agriculture or the state could be expected to have arisen only once—or at most, a few times. This view, together with the demonstrable accomplishment of European colonial domination of much of the world, worked both to deny the independence of state development in China (see discussions by Chang 1986; Treistman 1972) and South Asia and to marginalize the prehistory of “secondary” areas. Even today, areas of “primary” state formation are subject to the keenest critical gaze, and state origins in, for example, Southeast Asia, Korea, or Japan have been comparatively less well studied. To a certain extent, the recognition of independently developed complex societies in the New World (Willey and Sabloff 1980) worked to demolish diffusionist tenants, but the continuation of diffusionist assumptions in American culture-historical archaeology shows the elasticity and tenacity of this assumption.

Diffusionist archaeology effectively eclipsed developmental schemes such as those of Morgan, Tyler, and Marx for much of the twentieth century. How-

ever, views of Asia as passive and unchanging persisted, so that Asia was seen as “absorptive” of “influences” from more dynamic societies (cf. Sankalia 1977: 171–181). Within this schema, some parts of Asia were privileged, so that India and China have long been viewed as dual sources for all of Asian culture (e.g., Coedes 1968; contrast the views of Allard, Junker, and Shelach, this volume). Even these giants, however, have not been able to shake their image of passivity and isolation. With regard to the Harappan, Wenke (1990:409) wrote:

The diffusion of new ideas, objects and peoples into the Indus valley was mainly along routes through these western borderlands or along the thin coastal strip on the Arabian sea, since the Himalayas to the north were a formidable barrier. The Great Indian Desert to the east of the Indus valley reduced contacts with the rest of subcontinent.

This statement falsely isolates the Indus valley, ignoring Harappan sites in the Doab region and in Gujarat (e.g., Possehl et al. 1989), and dismisses the large body of evidence for strong and constant interaction between Harappan peoples and those elsewhere in South Asia. More than this, however, it persists in seeing “*the diffusion of new ideas, objects and peoples*” from west to east as a key element in the development of social and political complexity in this area (see Kim 1978: 170–171 for similar statements about Korea).

The decline of colonialism was followed by the development of postcolonial nationalist archaeological and historical interpretations (see discussions by Chakrabarti 1988a; Trigger 1989) and a renewed interest in demonstrating the indigenous development of complex societies in Asia (e.g., Hall 1976). To a certain extent, this new focus has been aided by (and perhaps even contributed to) changes in Anglo-American archaeological practice since the 1960s, most notably the demise of diffusion as the premier explanation for cultural change. It must be noted, however, that in much of the world culture-historical archaeology with its twin mechanisms of diffusion and migration continues to be the major archaeological orientation (e.g., Trigger 1989:174–182; see also Ikawa-Smith 1982; Pearson 1992; von Falkenhausen 1993 for discussions of alternate archaeological traditions in Asia).

MODELS FOR THE STATE

Functionalist Views and the New Archaeology

In the 1960s and 1970s, the proponents of the “new archaeology” explicitly rejected the logic of diffusion as an adequate explanatory device, seeking instead explanations for cultural change in such factors as environment and population growth. Adaptationist (Brumfiel and Earle 1987) or functional models for the origin and operation of state societies came to replace models of inevitable development (“man’s rise”) and coercion as a basis of state power (exemplified by the Asiatic models discussed above). These views, which stressed the “services” elites provide for their followers and the “needs” complex social and political structure filled (e.g., Flannery 1972; Johnson 1978, 1982), have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Brumfiel 1992; Brumfiel and Earle 1987).

By stressing universal factors and general explanatory models, the functionalist

views of new archaeologists provided a chance for Asian states to be integrated into general archaeological theory. These models may have gone a long way toward “rehabilitating” Asian states in the eyes of Western archaeologists, but by and large they were formulated without reference to the experiences of Asia. Cultural evolutionary stage models were widely employed in this functionalist revival; it is in this context that we must view the popularity of Wittfogel’s formulations. In this cleaned-up version, however, Wittfogel’s “hydraulic hypothesis” became a prime mover rather than a form of society.

A View from Below? Challenges to Functionalism and the Future

More recent archaeological research has begun to challenge functionalist views of state operation (Brumfiel 1992; Brumfiel and Fox 1994), returning to coercive or, as Brumfiel and Earle (1987) put it, political views of elite activity. Such formulations, which either are explicitly Marxist (e.g., Gilman 1981, 1991) or draw more loosely from Marxist views, stress that elites are concerned primarily about their own “benefit” and that state power may be oppressive, coercive, and may not represent an improvement over other ways of life for nonelites. It may not be an exaggeration to say that this reorientation depends (literally) on the viewpoint of the observer, so that archaeologists now place themselves below rather than in the elite (at least those who see elite domination as problematic). Whether or not this reflects a changing composition of the archaeological community remains for future historians of the discipline to debate. In any case, one might expect then that states in Asia that were never really able to shake the popular conception of despotic control (see above) would participate fully in this reorientation of archaeological views about complex societies. Archaeologists working in Asia can contribute significantly to emerging views about the nature and expression of political and social power in complex societies, and several papers in this volume (see, particularly, Sinopoli) take on that challenge directly. However, rather than simply embracing a trend, one might also hope that developing perspectives on complex societies in Asia will work to shape future archaeological perspectives in a more fundamental way. This optimistic picture is, however, complicated by the need for much basic research that remains to be done throughout Asia, as Underhill and Allard (this volume) remind us.

Just as European self-absorption and self-definition helped to create such constructions as the Asiatic Mode of Production and Oriental Despotism, an archaeology of Asian states that only reacts to theoretical and methodological developments elsewhere will simply reflect rather than reorient the preoccupations of the West. Instead, archaeologists of Asia (indigenous and foreign) should seek to contribute to the debates regarding the origin and operation of complex society on their own terms as well as to continue to elucidate basic issues such as chronology and content of the archaeological record. We must not, to borrow Chang’s citation from a Chinese proverb, engage in “cutting the feet to fit the shoes” (1989: 161), shaping Asian data to fit preexisting models. If instead, we recognize that existing views may be limited by their failure to seriously consider the experience of Asia, then it is incumbent on Asian specialists to help shape new views. The papers in this volume engage models of state societies developed for other

parts of the world (Junker, Shelach, and Underhill) and, in a small way, begin to show how such models both illuminate and limit us. We thus begin to construct a more truly global archaeology of complex societies.

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ABSTRACT

Asian states have long been perceived as being fundamentally different from those lying in the “developmental path” of European civilization—Mesopotamian, Med-

iterranean, and European complex societies. This perception has been manifest in such historical constructions as the Asiatic Mode of Production and Oriental Despotism and is continued in more recent popular treatments of Asian prehistory. In order to develop more appropriate and realistic views of all complex societies, this history must be addressed and the particular experiences of Asian states integrated into general archaeological models. The papers in this volume represent a small step in this direction. **KEYWORDS:** Asia, complex societies, states, colonialism, Oriental Despotism, Asiatic Mode of Production.