Recent years have seen an increasing number of English-language publications on the archaeology of China, among them introductory works by Liu Li and Chen Xingcan (2012), Roderick Campbell (2014), and Gideon Shelach-Lavi (2015). What all of these volumes have in common is their introductory nature, summarizing the state of archaeological research on early China. Furthermore, most of these volumes have a clear focus on the Central Plains, the so-called “Cradle of Chinese Civilization.” Anne P. Underhill’s (2013) collection of essays on the archaeology of early China is somewhat different, combining the sometimes conflicting views of various experts with contributions on various parts of China; however, even here more than half the book is dedicated to the Central Plains. This is by no means an oversight by the editor but a reflection of an actual unevenness in research. Traditionally, the Central Plains and the emergence of “Chinese Civilization” in this area have received the greatest interests from archaeologists and historians alike. With the increasing decentralization and regionalization of archaeological work since the 1980s (Falkenhausen 1995), field projects in other parts of China have started to somewhat mitigate this imbalance in research. Book-length studies on other parts of China published in English—many of them based on doctoral dissertations and/or international research projects—are likewise on the upsurge (e.g., Flad 2011; Shelach 1999 and 2009).

The newest volume by Rowan K. Flad and Chen Pochan, *Ancient Central China: Centers and Peripheries along the Yangzi River*, is an outgrowth of both of these trends: the flood of English-language summary publications on Chinese archaeology and the trend toward specialized studies on regions outside the Central Plain. Provocatively, the authors are using the term “Central China” not referring to the Central Plains but to the area encompassing the Middle Yangzi River, the Three Gorges, and the Sichuan Basin. As the authors themselves point out, this area is located slightly south of the actual geographical center of China, and—once one may add—west of what is generally referred to as Central China. In official terminology, Huazhong 华中 encompasses Henan 河南, Hubei 湖北, and Hunan 湖南 Provinces, while Flad and Chen do not include Henan but instead extend their research area into the eastern part of Xīnān 西南 (the Southwest) to encompass Chóngqìng 重庆 and the Sichuan Basin. The point here, however, is not how accurate the term “Central China” may be, but the provocativeness of the terminology which calls into question the “centrality of the Central Plains” and places a new and fresh emphasis on the importance of developments outside this main focus area of research on early China. It remains to be seen if “Central China” will become an established term of reference for this region, but in any case, in their monograph Flad and Chen convincingly show that parts of Hubei, Hunan, Chongqing, and the Sichuan Basin may be analyzed together in a fruitful way, and that the local archaeological record deserves further detailed research.

The authors combine this first comprehensive treatment of “Central China” during the last two millennia B.C. with significant theoretical insights into the importance of peripheral regions.

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2. Anke Hein: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
to developments in the center(s). Additionally, the monograph is a compelling case study in landscape archaeology in the widest sense. The authors conduct separate analyses of geographic, political, cultural, and ritual landscapes, and then view them in concert to reach a deeper understanding of prehistoric developments in the research area. The result resembles a verbalized — but not an actual — GIS (Geographic Information Systems) consisting of multiple layers — some of them nearly coinciding, others overlapping to various degrees — that together form a multi-dimensional picture with a greater depth than any of them could on its own. This study therefore has methodological and theoretical weight and at the same time is bound to become the main reference and starting point for any future studies on what the authors call “Central China.”

Within their area of research, the authors distinguish between three main sub-regions: the Sichuan Basin in the west, the Middle Yangzi region in the east, and the Three Gorges in between. Focusing on the time period from the late third to the late first millennia BC, they address two specific cultural questions: “(1) what was going on between the political cores in the Sichuan Basin and the Middle Yangzi during the last two millennia B.C.? and (2) what effect, if any did developments in political peripheries [i.e., the Three Gorges area] have on the adjacent core areas?” (pp. 3–4). To answer these questions, Flad and Chen adopt an approach that sees landscape both as consisting of objective features created by humans and as something perceived by past people. Other theoretical concepts that they make use of include World-Systems Theory (WST) and border concepts. WST is originally a concept in economic history, but the authors apply it here in a creative manner by applying it to the political sphere. They do not apply WST in all its aspects but mainly focus on the aspect of center vs periphery. In accordance with WST they hold that some places are politically more important than others but that politically peripheral regions may be crucial for developments in the center and therefore should not be overlooked. Flad and Chen thus follow the “pericentric approach” by P. M. Rice (1998) that focuses on politically peripheral regions. They are also inspired by David Carasso’s (1991) work on the Aztec in which he shows how political peripheries may become central within a ceremonial context. Following Bradley Parker’s (2006) borderland matrices model consisting of geographic, political, economic, and demographic boundaries, Flad and Chen distinguish between various overlapping topographies making up the research area. Their study is therefore quite similar to Tina Thurston’s (2001) research on secondary-state formation in Iron Age Scandinavia in which she examines social change by analyzing sociopolitical, economic, and sacred landscapes and their intersection.

The theoretical backbone of the monograph at hand thus fits into recent discussions of human-environment and human-human interaction within various networks of short- and long-distance connections and processes in which economy, ritual, and social identity intersect. The application of theories of overlapping landscapes to Chinese material is new and very welcome; equally important is the integration of textual and material evidence following the lead of Lothar von Falkenhausen (2006), who approached the Central Plains in this fashion. Applying a complex theoretical framework to an area such as “Central China” with its rather short history of research and its patchy material record and even less textual evidence is not unproblematic. To address this issue, the authors discuss the “topography of research” right after an overview of the physical topography (Chapter 2: The Environment of Central China) and before turning to the political, cultural, economic, and ritual topographies. Here, the main emphasis is on the historiographic orientation and the focus on the Central Plains that characterize the practice of archaeology in China until today, and to a lesser extent the influence of chance finds and building projects and the regionalization of archaeological research in China in recent years.

The archaeological evidence that came to light in connection with the Three Gorges Dam building project has been published in a large number of articles and monographs, but a considerable portion of the material still awaits publication. Particularly well-researched is the site of Zhongba 中坝, Zhong 忠县 County, Chongqing, that was excavated and published in great detail by a US-Chinese team in an inter-
disciplinary manner. This project was the training ground for a number of young archaeologists, including the authors of this monograph, and the material was analyzed in much detail in a number of dissertations and a bilingual series of books on the Salt Archaeology of China (Zhonggu yan ye kao gu 中国盐业考古; Li and von Falkenhausen 2006, 2008, and 2013). In Sichuan, especially the Chengdu 成都 Basin is well-known, and for the last ten to fifteen years field work results have been published in a timely and detailed manner, mostly in the journal of the Chengdu City Institute of Archaeology (Chengdu kao gu fa xian 成都考古发现). Nevertheless, the famous site of Sanxingdui 三星堆 is still incompletely published. Additionally, the mountains of western Sichuan which are mentioned only in a few single instances throughout this volume, are rather understudied. The Middle Yangzi River region has received considerably more attention, especially for the large amount of Bronze Age burials connected with the Chu 楚 state (Chen Zhenyu 1987); however, even here there is much regional variation: while Hubei is rather well-researched, much of Hunan is still unexplored. The book at hand draws from all of this material, but with a strong emphasis on the area that until fairly recently was largely unexplored: the Three Gorges region. The aim of the authors is clearly to connect this new body of material with the better-known material from the neighboring regions and introduce all three to a wider public under the new term of “Central China.”

Part II of the book introduces the archaeological material of the three subregions in three separate chapters (4 Sichuan Basin, 5 Middle Yangzi, 6 Three Gorges). The narrative focuses on “features and sites that played important roles in political integration” (p. 67). Hence, Part II is labeled “Political and Cultural Topographies.” The political landscape is identified through the relationship among sites, buildings pointing to high-status households, palaces, or administrative units, and “evidence of political institutions” (p. 68), but what this evidence may be remains a little vague. Cultural landscapes are defined as “spatial patterning of shared material culture (particularly ceramic inventories) across a region” (p. 68) which are not a reflection of culture as a whole but of shared traditions and practices. Here, the authors discuss the concept of wen hua 文化, archaeological culture, in Chinese archaeology, combined with local cultural series (lei xing 类型). Such a discussion and definition of the major terms should indeed stand at the beginning of every book-length archaeological study, and Flad and Chen manage to treat this issue with much clarity and adequate detail. Nevertheless, their insights seem to be of limited consequence to the description of the archaeological material in chapters 4–6: here, the evidence is listed separately by archaeological cultures, or sometimes “stages” or “phases” without keeping the three terms clearly separate. This changes in Part III: in the separate analysis of economic and two types of ritual topographies, three separate types of human behavior and the patterns they leave in the material record are considered outside the boundaries of archaeological cultures in a very convincing manner.

The connection between archaeological material and ethnic groups or political entities mentioned in historical texts likewise remains problematic. There are only few historical accounts of Shu 蜀, and it seems near impossible to link them to specific archaeological material or even keep Shu apart from the Ba 巴. As is generally common, the authors therefore speak of “Ba-Shu weapons,” “Ba/Shu script,” and even a “Ba-Shu bronze production system” (pp. 99 ff.); yet at the same time they discuss Ba and Shu separately under “The Sichuan Basin: Shu and its Predecessors” and “The Ba and the Archaeological Cultures of the Three Gorges” in two separate chapters with the Middle Yangzi and the Chu wedged in between, a split that is not convincing in all details. Additionally, it is still a point of discussion if the Three Gorges can be seen as culturally separate from the Sichuan Plain. While the Neolithic assemblages from the two places clearly differ from each other, the Bronze Age finds from the Three Gorges are very similar to those from the Sichuan Plain and they are even grouped into the same cultural horizons (Sanxingdui, Shi’erqiao 十二桥, Xinyicun 新一村, Qingyanggong 青羊宫), mostly based on ceramic typologies by which the “cultural topographies” in this study are largely defined. Certain local particularities remain in the Three Gorges area, but it is only within the “economic topography”
that the Three Gorges area comes into its own and shows its importance as major salt-producing region of importance to yet separate from the Sichuan Basin on one side and the Middle Yangzi on the other. The separate treatment of the Sichuan Basin and Three Gorges — though not without its problems — is therefore justified within the framework of this book and its focus on the economic and ritual importance of politically marginal regions.

The borders set for the Middle Yangzi region are a little more problematic, especially in connection with the Chu state which extended beyond the Middle Yangzi (including parts of Henan, Anhui 安徽, Jiangsu 江苏, Zhejiang 浙江, and Shanghai 上海 in Eastern Zhou 周 times) and whose material culture during the Western Zhou “may not be that different from the material culture of the Central Plains” (Falkenhausen 2006: 264). It is therefore debatable if the research area should not have been extended further or limited even more to include only areas conquered by the Chu at a later point in time. Within the framework of this study, including the whole area associated with Chu would have been a considerable task warranting nearly a study of its own; limiting the material for purposes of this study is therefore reasonable, although the choice of boundaries leaves some room for discussion. The Middle Yangzi region in itself has much material to offer but it shows considerable sub-regional diversity and lacks a coherent developmental sequence until well into the Bronze Age. Within the monograph at hand, this rich body of material receives comparatively limited treatment compared to the very detailed account of the considerably less abundant material from the Three Gorges region or the (admittedly better published) material from the Sichuan Basin. This brevity likely is dictated by the main questions of this study and its focus on the importance of the periphery rather than the center; another important factor is the research focus of the authors, who are specialists in the archaeology of the Sichuan Basin and the Three Gorges.

The monograph at hand grew from the dissertation research of the two authors on salt production in Sichuan that found their expression in a number of other publications: a monograph by Flad (2011) in which the evidence for salt production in the Three Gorges is described in great detail, a number of papers on various aspects of salt production as well as divination by the same author (e.g., Flad 2007), and papers by Chen on organization and technology of salt production on the one hand (Chen 2007a) and the Chu trade diaspora on the other (Chen 2007b). Together, Flad and Chen have furthermore published on the archaeology of the Sichuan Basin (Flad and Chen 2006) and conducted a multi-year survey of the Chengdu Plain. Their newest monograph naturally builds on this previous work. The material from the Three Gorges area was already well published in Flad’s 2011 monograph and is therefore here fittingly summarized, further elaborated, and connected with the results Chen’s previously unpublished detailed analysis of changes in briquetage as indicators for changes in the organization of production and trade. Not surprisingly, the passage on “Salt Production in the Three Gorges” which is part of Chapter 7 on “Economic Topographies: Production, Exchange, and the Integrating Role of Salt” is one of the strongest and most refined parts of this book. One would have wished that for the other two regions similarly detailed information would have been presented. Especially the metallurgy in the Middle Yangzi and the trade networks connected with metal production would have deserved a more detailed treatment as it would have had a major influence on the “economic topographies” of “Central China.”

The following two chapters focus on “ritual topographies” split into the two aspects of “Sacrifices and Divination” (chapter 8) and “Burials and Social Identity” (chapter 9). Based on the composition of object deposits and the state of the objects contained therein, the authors suggest that some of the assemblages were damaged religious paraphernalia that had to be disposed of, while others were the outcome of community or elite rituals. The meaning of these deposits — especially those observed at Sanxingdui — are much discussed and the interpretation suggested here will no doubt lead to further scholarly exchange on the topic. Especially the meaning of the stone figurines depicting kneeling humans (here interpreted as “stand-ins for human sacrifice victims” [p. 218]) and the implication of the human-like figures
and heads (here seen as an indication for a shift in the importance of individuals in society [p. 93] rather than a depiction of deities or ritual specialists [Sun Hua 2013]) will likely be discussed controversially.

Within the framework of this book, the analysis of evidence for ritual deposits is limited to the Sichuan Basin and the Middle Yangzi River. Deposition practices in other parts of China—e.g., the ceramic and bronze deposits in the Liangshan Region (Hein 2013: 492–510) and bronze hoards in the Central Plains — are not discussed here but deposition practices throughout China in the Bronze Age would definitely deserve detailed treatment in a separate study. This may also throw further light on the deposition practices in “Central China.” Divination practices are more widely studied, among others also by Flad, who previously published on pyro-osteomancy in Zhongba (Flad 2008). Inspired by research on ritual density based on thickness, extent, and number of charcoal deposits conducted on Maya remains (Moyes 2008), in the present study, individual burn marks are used as a proxy measure for divination frequency. Here, this method is only applied to the divination records of the Three Gorges previously discussed extensively by Flad in his dissertation and other publications. Based on this analysis, Flad and Chen suggest that the number of instances of divination increased at points of uncertainty (i.e., change to a new salt extraction method; increased integration into the Chu sphere; conflicts between Chu and Qin) and they convincingly argue that divination was employed to “ritually strengthen the efficacy of salt production and also establish and maintain leadership status of those in charge of this manufacturing activity” (pp. 228 f.). One would have wished to see a similarly detailed and insightful analysis of the material from the Chengdu Basin and the Middle Yangzi, but again a combination of scarcity of material and Three Gorges-centered layout of the book reduced the time and space spent on the other two regions.

In this chapter on burial remains, the analysis of the Three Gorges material is again the most detailed and the most exciting. The Neolithic to Early Bronze Age burial evidence is very limited, but for the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age, the material is grouped by geographic location into the Eastern Three Gorges and the Wanzhou region, with a clear emphasis on the latter. The authors distinguish between “Ba” and “Chu” burials, Ba being the local style and Chu showing a connection with the Middle Yangzi. For the Wanzhou region, they distinguish three types of cemeteries: I. mostly Ba-style burials; II. cemeteries dominated by hybrid burials (Chu construction, mainly Ba objects, some Chu items); III. cemeteries dominated by Chu-style burials but with contemporaneous Ba-style graves (p. 265). This typology works exceedingly well for the material at hand and for the
Author’s aims of examining “how burial rituals can be central to the construction of identity in a political periphery” (p. 232). Flad and Chen are able to identify hybrid burial practices throughout all of the Three Gorges region, but interestingly it is places far away from the Chu state but in immediate vicinity of salt-extraction sites that show the largest number of Chu burials and a considerable number of Chu weapons. Working from earlier research by Chen (2007b and 2010), the authors convincingly interpret these sites as evidence for a Chu trade diaspora connected with the flourishing salt trade. Ba graves containing Chu objects, on the other hand, are seen as a claim for cultural and political ties to the Chu expressed by individuals of local origin. In this manner, the Chu period burial rituals in the Three Gorges are interpreted as “context for the negotiation between Ba and Chu identities for some and the identification of Chu affiliation by others” (p. 277). The book thus ends with one of its strongest chapters: a detailed analysis of burial material from the Three Gorges region and its linkage with the Chu trade diaspora, whose traces were already identified in “economic topographies” and “ritual topographies” of divination rituals. Flad and Chen thus reach their aim of showing the importance of political peripheral regions — in this case the Three Gorges area — as nodes in production and trade and “central locations in the process where cultural identities were formed” (p. 279) and thus “illuminate broader patterns of interregional interaction in new ways” (p. 285).

Overall, the line of argumentation throughout the monograph is convincing and the story unfolds in a smooth way. Besides the main argument, the book provides a useful overview of the archaeological material of prehistoric and early historic “Central China,” introducing it to a wider audience for the first time. The comprehensive bibliography furthermore will be a very useful starting point for all future studies on the subject; however, certain aspects of the monograph make it a little difficult to use it for research purposes. These are mainly the lack of a catalog and tables listing sites, grave contents, or radiocarbon dates, and the limited number of illustrations: all of these editorial decisions were likely dictated by the publishing house and not by the authors themselves. The bibliography is very comprehensive and contains all the necessary references to excavation reports and other studies, but the reader would have to collect all the material him or herself to retrace the line of argument in further detail. The number of detailed maps is very useful for spatial orientation, but a few maps of surface cover, hydrology, temperatures and the like would have been helpful as an accompaniment to the admirably detailed description of the current state of palaeoenvironmental research on “Central China.” All of these details which have surely already been created by the authors for their own research might easily have been added in an appendix or even more conveniently as a digital resource — be it online or via CD-ROM. One may hope that they might be added in a new edition of the book in the future. Nevertheless, even without the benefit of this information, the monograph provides a very valuable and much needed overview of the current state of research on the archaeology of early “Central China” as defined by the authors. Even more importantly, it is a compelling case study for a multi-layer analysis of past landscapes, investigating political, economic, and ritual aspects separately and then recombining them in a multi-dimensional complex picture of past realities. This approach and the details of its application to the salt production sites and burial remains of the Bronze Age Three Gorges region promise to have a lasting impact by providing an example of a fruitful application of theoretical insights to “peripheral” regions in general and understudied part of early China in particular.

Editors Note: The Editors are sad to note the early passing on June 28, 2015, of Prof. Pochan Chen 陳伯楨 of National Taiwan University, one of the co-authors of this reviewed volume and a leading, young scholar in Chinese archaeology.

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