

Identity, culture and social change in ancient Sichuan, China

Luisa Elena Mengoni

During the past two decades archaeological research in China has been enriched by greater contributions from regional studies. This trend has been encouraged by several extraordinary archaeological discoveries made in provincial regions, including Sichuan province in southwest China.

The study of regional cultures is today an increasingly active field of archaeological research in China, supported by both the central government and local institutions. This new trend has developed in the past twenty years following dramatic discoveries made in provinces not previously prioritized in the national research agenda, and also major changes in the administrative structure and allocation of resources after the introduction of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in 1979.¹ The decrease of centralized political control over local administrations, and the subsequent autonomy enjoyed by local institutes of archaeology over the choice of excavations and the management of local resources, have led to a rapid increase of regional archaeological projects, especially in the most economically developed provinces. Sichuan province and Chongqing municipality in southwest China (Fig. 1) are good examples of this trend.²

In Sichuan the discovery of several major archaeological sites has dramatically changed our understanding of Neolithic

and Bronze Age China,³ and in Chongqing rescue excavations in the area of the Three Gorges are providing a huge bulk of new material for the study of the ancient societies settled along the Yangzi River.⁴ These remarkable finds have produced a strong sense of local pride, further enhanced by an increased desire to develop a cultural-heritage presence that can foster local and national tourism. Many archaeological and cultural-heritage projects also tend to emphasize the unique regional character of local archaeological evidence and to look for data that can substantiate the existence of local cultural sequences – an attitude that has been described as a “tendency toward a new regionalist form of centralism”.⁵ For example, since Chongqing municipality separated from Sichuan province in 1997, scholarly and non-scholarly research in Chongqing has also become more concerned to unearth, preserve and display local remains that can help in the process of constructing the past of the municipality.

Historical records and local cultures

The central role of historiography in Chinese archaeology,⁶ and the willingness to define a local past by the evidence of written records, have also further encouraged the tendency to link local archaeological assemblages, especially those attributed to the Bronze Age, with political, cultural or ethnic units mentioned in historical texts. However, in some cases, written sources of later date have also been used to support the existence of much earlier states or populations, and thus demonstrate the existence of uninterrupted local cultural sequences.

The historical references to the region now occupied by Sichuan province and Chongqing municipality for the period between the fifth and second century BC mention two ancient states: Shu and Ba (Fig. 1). Shu was located in what is now Sichuan province, Ba in the area now occupied by Chongqing municipality and part of Hubei province.⁷ The archaeological material dated to the periods of the Warring States (481–221 BC), Qin (221–206 BC) and Western Han (206–8 BC), especially if excavated from funerary contexts, has thus generally been grouped and interpreted under the labels Ba culture, Shu culture or Ba–Shu culture, and these terms have had quite strong cultural and ethnic connotations. Specific funerary practices have been ascribed to each culture and its supposed people, thus creating quite fictional boundaries within archaeological assemblages. Such interpretation has also been encouraged by the peculiarity of some types of burials and grave goods found exclusively in the region, such as boat-shape coffins made out of tree trunks, or bronze weapons decorated with a great variety of distinctive zoomorphic (animal-shape) motifs and mysterious symbols. The spectacular discovery in Chengdu city in 2000 of a large grave containing 17 wooden boat-shape coffins (Fig. 2),⁸ which was dated to the fifth–fourth century BC, early in the period of the Warring States, has further intensified the current debate on identity, culture and ethnicity in the region, especially in relation to the Bronze Age.

On the other hand, in recent studies of ancient Sichuan, archaeologists have been trying to define chronological sequences that are based on typological classifications of newly excavated material from settlements,⁹ labelled with the names of the most representative sites. These studies mark an important step forward in the archaeology of the region and they have helped to free archaeological interpretation from the constraints of the written evidence. However, this approach has been more readily adopted for Neolithic periods, which lack written evidence, than for the Bronze Age. The existence of historical texts from the Bronze Age, despite their sparse and fragmentary nature, has tended

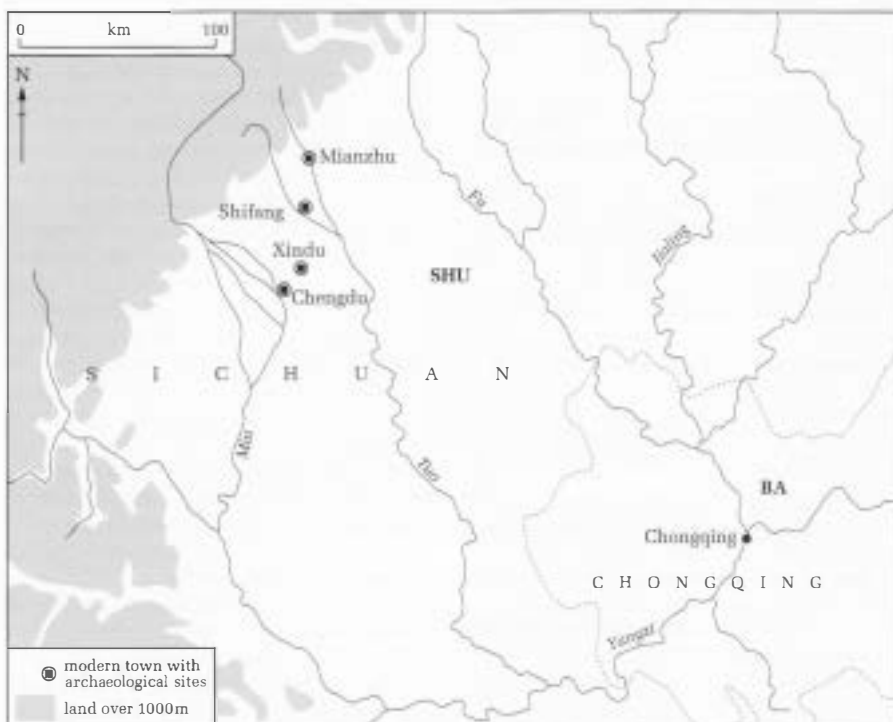


Figure 1 Sichuan province and Chongqing municipality showing the location of the ancient states of Shu and Ba and of the sites mentioned in the text.

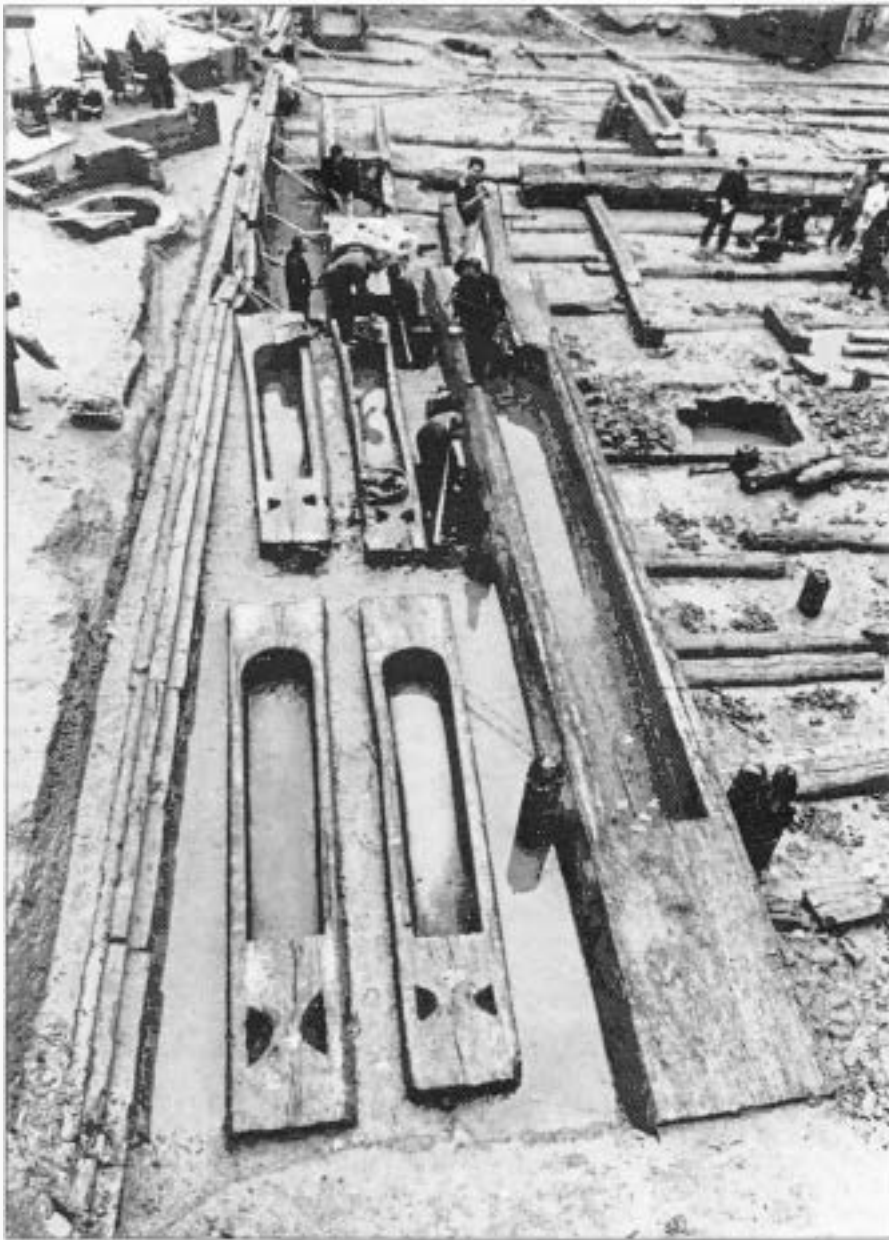


Figure 2 Part of the burial site of Shangyejie in Chengdu city showing the excavated boat coffins made from tree trunks.

to skew the interpretation of archaeological materials towards the identification of past states and peoples mentioned in them, as is true of the funerary remains of the late Bronze Age that have been attributed to the broadly defined Ba-Shu culture.

Identity and social change

Funerary remains constitute a distinct type of material culture in the way that they embody a complex of symbolic associations and social relations, only part of which is visible to us in material form. Although we cannot draw a direct link between funerary remains and past social realities, mortuary contexts can nevertheless convey information on group identities and social relationships. The high variability of funerary practices at local and regional levels that characterized late Bronze Age Sichuan cannot be explained

only by reference to broad cultural differences; it needs to be more specifically explained in relation to the complex social context of the period. We know from the sparse written sources that, between the fifth and the second century BC, the area of ancient Sichuan underwent profound political and social changes – military campaigns, migrations, transfers of people, and economic reforms. These events affected the existing social composition and internal stratification of the local communities, and had different implications according to the types of area (urban centres or peripheral areas) and the social agents (local or non-local élites, soldiers, immigrants and others) involved. The high level of social mobility at that time probably affected how people redefined their own identities, as individuals and as groups as well as in their material culture.

Research I have carried out on the funerary remains of ancient Sichuan, in particular burial types and certain classes of items and decorative motifs, had the specific aims of identifying group identities within the larger cultural groups mentioned in the written sources, and of exploring how local and imported funerary practices were acquired and transformed over time, as evidence of social changes and interaction.¹⁰

Funerary remains of the Chengdu Plain

One of the areas I investigated was the Chengdu Plain where variations in funerary practices between the fifth and second century BC, and before and after the Qin conquest in 316 BC, clearly suggest a complex and changing social landscape within both urban and peripheral communities. Some élite burials of the Chengdu Plain (dated to the fifth–fourth century BC) contain boat coffins with different quantities and combinations of local and imported items, such as local round-base pottery vessels, weapons with stylized and zoomorphic motifs, and imported bronze vessels produced in ancient workshops in the provinces of Hubei and Shanxi. In some cases, for example at the site of Shangyejie in Chengdu city and at the burial sites in the towns of Mianzhu¹¹ and Xindu¹² (see Fig. 1), the graves are clearly those of members of the highest aristocracy, who had privileged access to a large variety of products, particularly the most refined and exclusive items (Fig. 3) produced in areas outside the Chengdu Plain, such as the region occupied by the Chu kingdom in modern Hubei province. In other cases, such as Baihuatan¹³ and other similar burials in Chengdu city (dated to the fourth–third century BC), the predominance of weapons decorated either with local zoomorphic designs or with stylized motifs inspired by archaic patterns used on

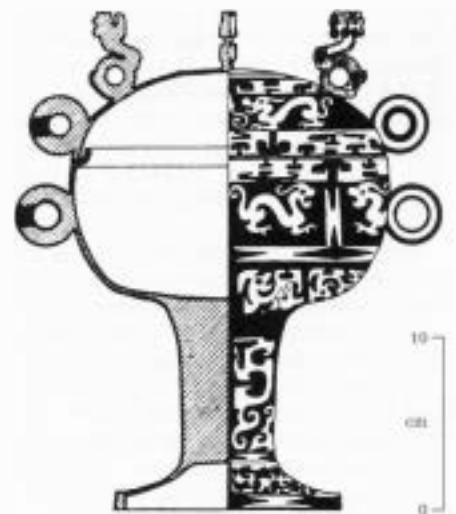


Figure 3 A bronze vessel from the burial site at Mianzhu, Chengdu Plain (after Wenwu 10, 24, Fig. 3.1, 1987).

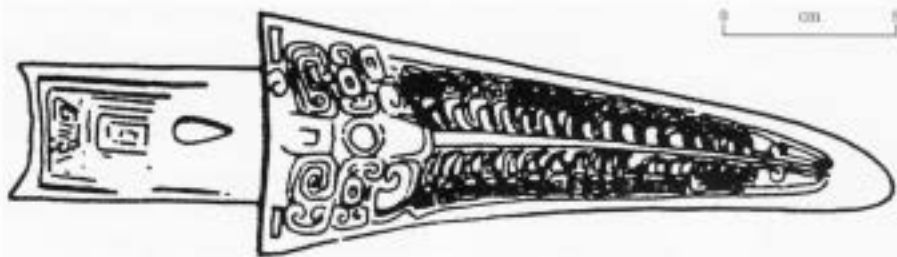


Figure 4 A bronze blade (*ge*) from the burial site at Mianzhu, Chengdu Plain. The stylized motifs imitate patterns used on weapons produced during the Western Zhou dynasty (1050–771 BC) in the present province of Henan. (After Wenwu 10, 28, Fig. 11.9, 1987.)



Figure 5 A bronze blade (*ge*) from burial no. 1 at the Jinyucun burial site in Chengdu city, with local zoomorphic motifs depicting a stylized dragon.

similar weapons of the Western Zhou dynasty (1050–771 BC) from Henan (Fig. 4), together with a smaller number of imported vessels, seems to suggest that the burials also belonged to members of the élite, but of a somewhat lower rank and probably connected more with the exercise of a military power. Finally, in another group of burials of the same period in Chengdu city, the grave goods consist mainly of bronze weapons and vessels of local production, with no imported items. The weapons found in these burials are all decorated with local zoomorphic designs (Fig. 5) and suggest a well defined identity shared by the members of this high-rank group, probably linked to the military class and expressing their affiliation through repetitive sets of symbols and decorative motifs.

In the period between the third and the second century BC, a general trend towards the acquisition of non-local practices is evident both in types of burial and in grave goods. Wooden encasements with or without inner coffins, known as *guo* burials, and simple rectangular pits became the most widespread type of burial, while boat coffins gradually disappeared. The items found in some burials of high rank show a marked distance from local traditions, as at the burial site of Fenghuangshan in Chengdu city dated to the late second century BC (Fig. 6),¹⁴ where the grave goods are

mainly flat-base pottery jars and lacquer objects. Other burials contain unusual features, such as the bronze weapons with zoomorphic motifs in a tomb made of wooden axes found in Guangrongxiao, also in Chengdu city. These burials may have belonged to high military or imperial officials connected with the installation of the new Qin administration. Cemeteries excavated at other sites, for example at Longquanyi at the southeastern edge of Chengdu city,¹⁵ show instead the rise of new communities, probably immigrants and soldiers from Shaanxi transferred under Qin law. Here the burials contain a completely different set of grave goods: they are all *guo* burials or simple shafts containing flat-base jars, simple lacquered items and very sparse weapons with no decoration.

The cemetery of Shifang

A different development of funerary practices is represented by the cemetery of Shifang, north of Chengdu city (see Fig. 1).¹⁶ It dates from the fifth to the third century BC and contains 53 burials, mainly boat coffins and simple shafts, with only a few *guo* burials. The distinctive characteristic of this site is that all the grave goods found in the 44 burials that date from the fifth to the third century BC are locally made and show very few variations over this long period of time. At the site there is

no evidence of imported items, as there is in the high-rank burials of the Chengdu Plain (Mianzhu, Xindu) or in Chengdu city (Baihuatan), and none of the boat-coffin burials is comparable in size and scale to those in the cemetery of Shangyejie in Chengdu, dated to the fifth to fourth century BC. The cemetery of Shifang probably belonged to a quite homogeneous community that shared a strong sense of group identity. Nevertheless, internal variations in the quantity of grave goods and in the typology of burials suggest the existence of vertical differentiations in status or rank, and horizontal divisions that are probably due to the affiliation of the deceased to specific military groups or to differences of gender. Evidently, high-rank members of this community did not have the same privileged access to imported items as is apparent at other sites in the Chengdu Plain or in the city, and their status was mainly expressed by the quantity and variety of richly decorated bronze weapons. At the site there is evidence of more than one élite group. Only at a later date, in the third–second century BC, does a marked change appear in the choice of grave goods, which are clearly distant from the local tradition: *guo* burials and rectangular pits become the most common type of interment and the weapons do not bear any zoomorphic designs. It is highly probable that this change occurred during the third century BC after the troops of the Qin emperor occupied Sichuan.

Conclusion

The variations in funerary practices evident at sites in the city and plain of Chengdu, and their distinctive local developments as exemplified by the Shifang cemetery, show how the ways in which the

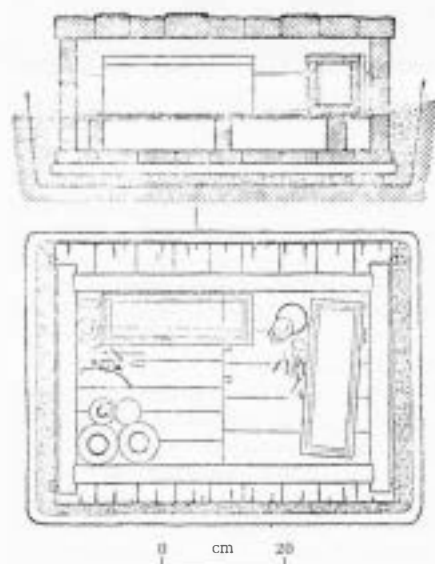


Figure 6 Section and plan of a *guo* burial composed of a wooden encasement divided into internal sections, Fenghuangshan, Chengdu city (after Kaogu 5, 418, Fig. 1, 1991).

expression of various group identities differed by area and by the groups involved, whether they were aristocratic or military élites, soldiers or immigrants. The analysis of variations in the quantity, variety and combinations of grave goods and burial types allows specific social groups to be identified within the larger cultural entities that have generally been linked to the states or peoples mentioned in ancient historical sources. The study of the persistence, adoption and elaboration of funerary practices over time can thus make a valuable contribution to our understanding of social complexity and long-term changes in urban and rural areas in China.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of these issues see L. von Falkenhausen, "The regionalist paradigm in Chinese archaeology", in *Nationalism, politics and the practice of archaeology*, P. L. Kohl & C. Fawcett (eds), 198–231 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
2. Chongqing municipality is a new administrative unit, at the same level as a province, created in 1997. It includes the former eastern districts of Sichuan province and the Three Gorges area farther east in the Yangzi Valley and is controlled directly by the central government.
3. An increasing number of detailed archaeological reports are now being published in China as monographs and in major academic journals; see also the catalogues edited by R. Bagley, *Ancient Sichuan: treasures from a lost civilization* (Seattle and Princeton: Seattle Art Museum and Princeton University Press, 2001) and by A. Thote, *Chine, l'énigme de l'homme de bronze* (Paris: Editions Findakli, 2003).
4. The results of these new excavations are being published in annual monographs by the Cultural Relics Bureau of Chongqing.
5. See p. 203 in von Falkenhausen 1995 (n. 1 above).
6. See L. von Falkenhausen, "On the historiographical orientation of Chinese archaeology", *Antiquity* 67, 839–49, 1993, and C. Kwang-chih, "Archaeology and historiography", *World Archaeology* 13, 156–69, 1981.
7. For a discussion of these historical sources, see S. F. Sage, *Ancient Sichuan and the unification of China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).
8. Chengdu Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo, "Chengdu shi Shangyejie chuanguan, dumuguan muzang fajue baogao" (Report on the discovery of wooden and boat coffins in Shangyejie, Chengdu), in *Chengdu Kaogu Faxian* ("Archaeological discoveries in Chengdu"), 78–136 (Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe, 2002).
9. Sun Hua, "Sichuan pendi qintong wenhua chulun" ("Introduction to the bronze cultures of the Sichuan basin") in *Sichuan pendi de Qintong Shidai* ("The Bronze Age of the Sichuan basin"), Sun Hua (ed.), 2–46 (Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe, 2000).
10. In my PhD thesis (completed at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London in 2003) I focused on the funerary traditions of ancient Sichuan between the fifth and the second century BC. I wish to thank Dr Wang Yi and Mr Jiang Zhanghua, director and vice-director of the Chengdu Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Professor Sun Hua, vice-director of the School of Archaeology and Museology of Peking University, for their constant support during my fieldwork in China in 2000–2001.
11. Sichuan sheng bowuguan, "Sichuan Mianzhu xian chuanguan mu" ("A boat coffin burial in Mianzhu"), *Wenwu* 10, 22–33, 1987.
12. Sichuan sheng bowuguan, "Sichuan Xindu Zhanguo mu guo mu" ("The Warring States guo burial in Xindu"), *Wenwu* 6, 1–12, 1981.
13. Sichuan sheng bowuguan, "Chengdu Baihuatan zhongxue shi hao mu fajue ji" ("Report on the burial of Baihuatan, Chengdu"), *Wenwu* 3, 40–46, 1976.
14. Xu Pengzhang, "Chengdu Fenghuangshan Xi Han mu guo mu" ("The Western Han guo burial in Fenghuangshan, Chengdu"), *Kaogu* 5 417–25, 1991.
15. Chengdu shi Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo, "Chengdu Longquanyi qu Beigandao mu guo mu qun fajue jianbao" ("Preliminary report on the guo burials in Longquanyi, Chengdu"), *Wenwu* 8, 21–32, 2000.
16. Sichuan Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo, "Shifangshi Chengguan Zhanguo Qin Han muzang fajue baogao" ("Report on the discovery of Warring States Qin and Han burials in Chengguan, Shifang"), in *Sichuan Wenwu baogao ji* ("Collected archaeological reports of Sichuan"), 112–85 (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1998).