



The Ancient Highlands of Southwest China: From the Bronze Age to the Han Empire (Oxford Studies in the Archaeology of Ancient States)

Alice Yao

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Although long considered to be a barren region on the periphery of ancient Chinese civilization, the southwest massif was once the political heartland of numerous Bronze Age polities. Their distinctive material tradition--intricately cast bronze kettle drums and cowrie shell containers--has given archaeologists and historians a glimpse of the extraordinary wealth, artistry, and power exercised by highland leaders over the course of the first millennium BC. In the first century BC, Han imperial conquest reduced local power and began a process of cultural assimilation. Instead of a clash between center and periphery or barbarism and civilization, this book examines the classic study of imperial rule as a confrontation between different political temporalities. The author provides an archaeological account of the southwest where Bronze Age landscape formations and funerary traditions bring to light a history of competing warrior cultures and kingly genealogies. In particular, the book illustrates how mourners used funerals and cemetery mounds to transmit social biographies and tribal affiliations across successive generations. Han incorporation thus entangled the orders of state time with the generational cycles of local factions, foregrounding the role of time in the production of power relations in imperial frontiers. The book extends approaches to empires to show how prehistoric time frames continue to shape the futures of frontier subjects despite imperial efforts to unify space and histories.

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