

Introduction

The road to Shu is as difficult as ascending to heaven.

—Tang dynasty poet Li Bo, 701–762 A.D.

I came back by bus from the war areas, and remember of the long journey south only how wonderful it was to cross the range of the Ch'in-ling Mountains, which separates North China from Szechwan. One crosses through the pass, and in half an hour, one has left behind the eroded hills that face the arid country of the north to find oneself in the warm moist air of Szechwan, where bamboo begins to grow on the south face of the range.

—journalist Theodore White, reminiscing about 1943 A.D.¹

Traveling the same road twelve centuries apart, Li Bo and Theodore White expressed a pair of proverbial feelings: Shu, that is, Sichuan, may be hard to reach, but worth the effort. A standard relief map shows Sichuan distinctly. It appears as a large dark green blotch, for a lush, natural lowland basin, encircled by yellow and brown hues signifying rugged higher ground. Only the narrow blue band of a river, the Yangtze, connects the green to other lowlands far downstream. Terrain sets Sichuan apart. One might reasonably expect an international frontier demarcating the basin from China but there is only a provincial line, for Sichuan lies well within the Chinese embrace. One hundred ten million people inhabit this land; it is the country's most populous province.

The classical ancients a thousand years and more before Li Bo's time regarded Sichuan as somewhat offcenter in their conception of the world. And so it is, far removed from the Yellow River and the loess soil lands and central plains, that hallowed northern Chinese core of literate East Asian civilization. Sichuan is mentioned but scantily in ancient literature, and ambiguity shrouds its relevance to

the core zone. There are indeed some mythical allusions to culture heroes, gossamer threads that purportedly connect Sichuan to the Yellow River area. But truly historical references are rare prior to the annexation of Sichuan by the state of Qin in 316 B.C., and before then the annals treat Sichuan as quite foreign, contradicting the myths.

The problem is a practical one for some scholar toiling to compile a historical atlas, and the Chinese, to be sure, are meticulous historians and cartographers. The mapmaker ponders: When, at what date, should Sichuan be included within the limits of China? A historian may ask a follow-on question: Given its geographic position and its virtually self-sufficient economic potential, what force has kept Sichuan in China?

When Li Bo made his trip, Sichuan already was the richest and most heavily populated part of China. Yet notwithstanding its importance through imperial times down to modern China, the Sichuan of preimperial antiquity until recently belonged to a dark age. The wealth of documentation covering China's classical heartland shed but dim light on this peripheral region. Odd bits of data did not mesh well, long daunting a serious appraisal of ancient Sichuan.

That did not begin to change substantially until about the mid-1970s. Since then progress has been steady. Archaeologists and historians now have more information, much more, than Li Bo about early Sichuan. We now know that Sichuan was not some unenlightened, semisavage outback prior to its political incorporation into China. In Sichuan modern Chinese scientists have lately uncovered an ancient country well along the road to true civilization, with its own cities, fine artisanship, and a form of literacy.² This book assembles the recent findings from Sichuan and places them in a historical context.

The name *Sichuan* means "four streams," but was not used for the region until the Song and Yuan dynasties in the thirteenth century A.D.³ Prior to then the Sichuan basin usually had been divided into two or more administrative entities. To apply the medieval term *Sichuan* when speaking of more remote ancient times, strictly speaking, is an anachronism, but a convenient one, like referring to *China* before its unification under the eponymous Qin dynasty. There are simply no other convenient, commonly used expressions, so *Sichuan* will have to do.

Ancient Chinese themselves spoke of Sichuan by joining two names of subregions within the basin, Ba and Shu, as *Ba-Shu*. Ba was that portion lying along the Yangtze and some tributary streams in eastern Sichuan. Shu included the present provincial capital of Chengdu, its surrounding plain and adjacent territories in western

Sichuan. The present unit of study is set by the modern frontier of Sichuan province and includes as well some adjacent zones. Most noteworthy among these border areas is the Han River valley of southern Shaanxi province. Both Li Bo and Theodore White traversed the Han on their way into Sichuan from the north. It figures greatly in the history of Sichuan and China.

After ascending and descending the Qinling Mountains, crossing the Han valley, and climbing once again up and down over the Daba mountains, one at last arrives in Shu. A broad lowland plain then stretches south, dotted by great cities like Chengdu, district towns, and innumerable tiny hamlets. One of these small places, called Sanxingdui, provides the setting for a great archaeological mystery story, an Indiana Jones tale come true. Excavated from 1981 to 1986, Sanxingdui is the site of a genuine lost and found proto-civilization. Its treasure pits had lain undisturbed since archaic times beneath a rural village.

Chapter 2 presents the findings on Sanxingdui and related remains from early Shu, as well as the evidence of mythology, inscriptions, and history. Along with other peoples, the Shu people helped to vanquish the Shang and establish its long lived successor, the Zhou dynasty. This episode briefly projected Shu power as far away as the central plains. Thereafter, however, the Shu receded into near oblivion in western Sichuan. Little material on them is available, although recent studies on the typology of Shu bronzes have supplemented the sparse and uncertain textual data.

Eastern Sichuan was occupied by an ethnic melange collectively called *Ba*. Chapter 3 reviews what is known of these peoples' origins, material culture, the enigmatic Ba script, and the Ba role in history. History for the Ba meant war. They were renowned for their war chants and their war drums, many of which were excavated and studied during the 1970s and 1980s. More often than not the principal Ba adversary in war was Chu, a more powerful country on the middle Yangtze and Han Rivers. As Chu pushed upstream into Sichuan, Ba relocated closer to Shu in western Sichuan.

Ba and Shu never merged into one political unit although much sharing and borrowing resulted from their contact, leading to the Ba-Shu culture. It took shape while the late Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods unfolded in the northern lands around the Yellow River.⁴ During this time Shu surfaced from obscurity. Bronzes, weaponry, and other artifacts all attest to renewed interchange with the outside but the Ba-Shu culture also exhibited unique features, including an independent form of writing. The description

of Sichuan's Ba-Shu culture was one of the major accomplishments of Chinese archaeology in the 1980s.

Chu greatly influenced this Ba-Shu culture, as is well attested by recent artifact finds. The Han and Yangtze Rivers gave Chu relatively easy access and the possibility of attaching Sichuan to a southern superpower stretching downstream to the Pacific. During the fourth century B.C. a process was well underway toward bringing that about. Sichuan's other neighbor, the state of Qin, lay beyond the Qinling mountain barrier, seemingly irrelevant in Sichuanese matters. But human beings, when making history, sometimes defy geography.

Chapter 4 shows how Qin greatly strengthened itself by a drastic internal reform, surpassed the strength of its enemies, and at length turned its attention southward to Sichuan. Qin engineers built an alpine road to Shu, traces of which were discovered and surveyed in the 1980s. Qin statesmen adroitly availed of the political schism between Ba and Shu. Their role in Sichuan was overtaking that of Chu. In 316 B.C. a Qin army crossed over and seized Shu, Ba, and the Han River valley. There would be no Chu empire of the south.

Hitherto the warring states of the central plains had mutually sparred for advantage, even predominance, but their goals fell short of attempting universal conquest. Around the time Sichuan fell into Qin hands, that changed. Sichuanese resources were harnessed to the protracted Qin war effort on all fronts. The native Shu nobility was first coopted, then suppressed. Shu towns became fortified Qin bastions. Shu was sinified, culturally made part of Qin, while Qin enlisted the peoples of Ba as auxiliaries. The sinification of Sichuan under Qin lasted a full century. It was a bumpy and often painful process during which the procedures of assimilating conquered territories evolved.

Chapter 5 cites newly discovered documents including a land reform plan for Sichuan and details regarding the migration of northern settlers in Shu. Major public works projects were conceived and implemented. Other texts and archaeology fill in the picture of how Qin remade Ba and Shu by separate means appropriate to each. Dividing, and ruling, Qin perpetuated a dipolarity in Sichuan that still persists. With Sichuan consolidated, Qin straddled both the Yellow River and Yangtze worlds to create a synthesis of north and south that proved irresistible.

In 221 B.C. the Qin juggernaut crushed all its foes and founded the Qin empire; that is, China. The First Emperor brutally and incautiously tried to remake everything at once. But all men are mortal, even first emperors. Qin disintegrated just over a decade after win-

ning Chinese unity, although the resulting turmoil left Qin institutions intact in Sichuan. Continuity was maintained there. The reunification of China by the succeeding regime owed much to a sound support base in Sichuan and the Han area, from which the new dynasty drew its name. Chapter 6 details how Han Sichuan prospered, expanded, and became fully assimilated into Han China.

Sichuan was but one of the distinct regions that Qin combined to establish China. The northern steppe, the northeast, and the coastal states constituted other regions, as did Chu in the south and the Qin homeland itself on the western fringe. The core states of the loess soil zone and the Yellow River floodplain, together, were yet another region. This central plains area has long possessed a certain historiographic and sentimental primacy. In archaic times its cities arose before urbanization elsewhere in China. The written Chinese language developed there, followed later on by classical philosophy. Chinese historians traditionally have viewed the central plains as a beacon from which emanated all the illuminating rays of civilization.

That picture is being adjusted. As truth is sought from facts, enshrined doctrine means less in evaluating each region's role in the making of China. Every region devised, contributed, received, and adapted elements, an interactive process lasting many centuries. Qin forged the achievement of Chinese unity itself. A mature, dispassionate Chinese historiography of late has devoted serious attention to Qin, overcoming both orthodox complacency and Maoist mania to do so. Archaeologists are uncovering more of the Qin past, in the original Qin homeland and in Qin's Sichuan colony.

The newly gained understanding of Sichuan before Qin rule enhances an appreciation of just how crucial was the later Qin annexation of Ba and Shu. In particular, the ruins of Sanxingdui give some notion of the region's power, manifest and latent. When ancient sources comment on the indispensibility of Sichuan to Qin, it is now evident what they mean. Adding Sichuan more than doubled the extent of Qin. Immense Sichuan reserves of grain, metals, and capable manpower strengthened the Qin armies. Flotillas bearing Qin troops debouched from Sichuan and down the Han and Yangtze Rivers to destroy Chu, the main stumbling block to total Qin dominance. With Chu neutralized, Qin devoted its full attention northward to the central plains and inexorably triumphed.

In Sichuan north and south, the worlds of the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, were first brought under one banner. In Sichuan the Qin and then the Han regimes tested the social mechanisms of Chinese power. In Sichuan those techniques were sustained, even when hob-

bled or eradicated elsewhere. The sheltered Sichuan basin might be thought of as the chrysalis out of which issued imperial China.

This book is based in very large part on Sichuan archaeological findings as published through 1990. The work of Chinese scientists and historians has scored significant gains and yet it is not beyond criticism. All too few habitation sites have been explored in sustained digging lasting more than a season. Most finds come from tombs, yielding many objects while raising unanswered questions concerning how these were used in a living context. Only more extensive probing can answer such questions, but the Sichuan basin today teems with people and economic activity. Wider operations to retrieve the past will inevitably disrupt the lives of modern Sichuanese and progress thereby is slow.

A treasure hunt attitude prevails among many ordinary folk, and so Chinese scholars must expend too much effort in salvage operations. Reacting to the chance discovery of yet another ancient Shu graveyard absorbs the time and energies of trained personnel, assets that might be more profitably directed toward uncovering the remains of cities and towns. And no surveys of potential, unexcavated sites are available, although such data would be tremendously useful to historians.

Most published work is evidently conscientious. Art historians and epigraphers have described and analyzed sufficient material to make discernible the outlines of early Sichuan history. Chinese journal articles over the years have run a wide gamut from overly adventurous to judiciously sober. Less of the former style is seen lately. Cool professionalism marks the site reports from Sanxingdui and subsequent critiques.

In previous years some researchers appeared to start with an unsubstantiated premise and then selectively present data to fit it, not unlike the manner of nineteenth century romantics like Heinrich Schliemann. Fashions of interpretation have come and gone. For example, during the early 1980s various approaches aimed at portraying the Shu people as a branch of the northern Qiang barbarians. After 1985 proponents of this view ceased being published in accessible journals, and subsequent migration hypotheses have been phrased more circumspectly.

A preoccupation of several theorists continues to be the ethnic identification of ancient peoples and the relation of their supposed remains to textual leads. Artifacts are frequently discussed in the context of some bit of literary evidence with a view to proving the passage's veracity. This methodology is understandable in the Chinese

context, but it means that those outside the confines of Sichuan archaeology must exercise care in using the data. On the other hand, if Chinese scholars refrained from all interpretation in the light of texts, their site reports would be reduced to dull inventories of recovered goods and so hold less interest as grist for historians.

In relying on Chinese scholarship some allowance must be made for the tendency by a few writers to anachronistically cast Ba and Shu as frontier "minority peoples" in a role too neatly analogous to today's non-Han minorities vis-à-vis the controlling ethnic majority. A deep-seated conceit on the part of many in China still assumes every single technological or cultural advance to have radiated outward from the Yellow River heartland. And there has been a stubborn reluctance, now waning a bit, to acknowledge that any area now within China's borders may have received salutary influences from some foreign quarter.

Provincialism and localism, too, occasionally infuse Chinese site reports and are detrimental in their own ways. As for the constraints of Marxism-Leninism, these are mercifully relaxed in most post-Cultural Revolution work. Ba and Shu have not been seriously mutilated on procrustean beds of primitive society, slavery, feudalism, and so forth. The once obligatory quotations from Marx, Engels, and the omniscient political authorities are now either innocuously pro forma or have been dropped altogether. Yet not much in the way of theory has emerged to fill the void. Chinese scholars say all too little about how they suppose ancient Sichuan society actually functioned.

Academic autocracy, entrenched bureaucratic stubbornness, and factionalism survive to impede Sichuan archaeology as elsewhere in China and the world at large. But experience abroad and contact with overseas specialists have nurtured a new breed of professionals. Their expertise is progressing markedly, the repertoire of techniques expanding. During the 1980s ancient Sichuan became a high-priority locale of excavation activity. Historians may now avail themselves of new archaeologically provided materials, abundant in some aspects although still modest in others. It is hoped that this book may make these finds and their meaning accessible to both China hands and nonsinologists, for as with every region on the Chinese rim, Sichuan's history is part of world history.

Recognizing some of China's technical inadequacies in the face of an immense archaeological task, during March 1991 the national Cultural Relics Bureau announced a relaxation of its strict policy under which all foreign specialists had been forbidden from participating at Chinese digs. Some joint excavations may henceforth be

planned. Initially these will be limited to paleolithic and early neolithic prehistory, and so it is unlikely that non-Chinese scholars can uncover Ba or Shu remains soon. But the revised policy nevertheless should help by augmenting scarce resources, by bringing overall Chinese standards closer to the state of the art elsewhere, and by further breaking down xenophobic barriers.

Much additional scholarly work remains to be done. Critical peer review within China (1990) has faulted shortcomings in the first (1987) Sanxingdui report, a reexamination that itself is a measure of that site's portentous significance. Sanxingdui was probably the ruling center of Shu, followed in turn by Chengdu, although other Shu towns existed as well and must be surveyed. In Ba the locations of ancient cities are mentioned by texts but no site yet compares with Sanxingdui.

Studies on the origins of the Shu and the Ba peoples still have not fully sorted fact from fable. This research should continue without preconceived bias. The standards of Chinese archaeology are rising, commensurate to the challenge. Earnest students seek training in the latest techniques. Shu and Ba towns and tombs await excavation, like time capsules, containing artifacts to appraise and documents to be read. The scripts of Ba and of the Ba-Shu culture persist in thwarting decipherment, but as with hieroglyphics and cuneiform, these writings too will someday be demystified.

Sichuan's hidden past is emerging from the earth after more than two millennia. The ramifications of Sichuan in antiquity extend over all China, and have lasted to this day.