



Full length article

## Local developments on the Eastern Rim of the Tibetan Plateau: The prehistoric Anning River Valley

Anke Hein

University of Oxford, Institute of Archaeology, 36 Beaumont St, Oxford, OX1 2PG, United Kingdom



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### ABSTRACT

The Anning River Valley at the eastern rim of the Tibetan Plateau has long been a transit area and exchange corridor connecting Southwest China to the northern steppe. What has long remained unexplored are the local developments in the Anning River Valley itself. Recent fieldwork has brought to light new evidence and recent research on the local chronology has greatly enhanced our understanding of local prehistoric developments. Nevertheless, the Anning River Valley is usually treated as a cultural unit rather than the diverse area it is. Based on the results of recent fieldwork analyzed in a combination of object typology and spatial analysis, the present paper argues that during the Neolithic period the Anning River Valley was inhabited by various separate groups engaged in various types of subsistence practices. Over time, these groups grew increasingly closer and were finally drawn into one identity group connected by the practice of erecting megalithic graves. The conspicuous nature of those monuments and the complex rituals conducted in and around them also attracted communities in the neighboring mountains. Some of them adopted the practice wholesale; others adopted only certain aspects but preserved other burial customs of their own as well as ceramic form traditions and tool assemblages. As the paper shows, these differences in reaction to this new burial practice depended partially on local geographic preconditions, partially on the nature of the groups involved and various cultural factors.

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### 1. Introduction

Surrounded by the high and forbidding mountains of the North–South-trending Hengduan Mountain Range, the wide and fertile Anning River Valley in the Liangshan Region, Southwest Sichuan, has been settled since early prehistoric times. Recent research has highlighted the area's importance as an exchange corridor between North and South (Hein, 2014); by contrast, local developments in the Anning River Valley itself largely have remained unexplored. A new focus on settlement sites during the last ten years of fieldwork – mainly with the aim of establishing a local chronology (Hein, forthcoming-a) – has greatly increased our understanding of local prehistoric developments. In spite of this diversity, the Anning River Valley usually has been treated as a unit inhabited by one cultural group receiving various kinds of outside influence rather than an area with various local groups and developments of their own (e.g., Jiang, 2007; Sichuansheng et al., 2006).

Based on the results of recent fieldwork, the present paper argues that far from being a unit, during the Neolithic period the Anning River Valley was inhabited by at least three separate groups characterized by different modes of subsistence and ceramic assemblages. Over time, these groups became increasingly more closely connected. With the emergence of the megalithic-grave burials, an increasingly large

number of local communities came to be drawn to this particular mortuary tradition. At the same time, local subsistence practices remained distinct and even ceramic assemblages and burial goods retained local particularities. Furthermore, the receptiveness toward outside influences seems to have varied throughout the Anning River Valley, reflecting the continued existence of several separate communities with distinct cultural practices and identities that were nevertheless linked to each other through shared burial practices and various types of exchange relations. This paper traces the development, change, and interaction between these groups and their reflection in the material record.

#### 1.1. Geographic background

The Anning River Valley is the core area of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Southwest Sichuan, Southwest China. Located at the rim of the Tibetan Plateau and bordering on the Yunnan–Guizhou Plateau and the Chengdu Plain, the area has long been an intersection point of various culture-geographic regions and a transit region for exchange routes in all directions (Fig. 1). The valley formed by the Anning River and its tributaries is the largest mountain plain in the region and the second largest in Sichuan. In its upper reaches, the river flows in a very narrow delta at high elevation starting from over 4000 m at its source, through the wide plain around Xichang at an altitude of around 1500 m, to below 800 m in Panzhuhua. At its widest point, the river

E-mail address: [anke.hein@arch.ox.ac.uk](mailto:anke.hein@arch.ox.ac.uk)

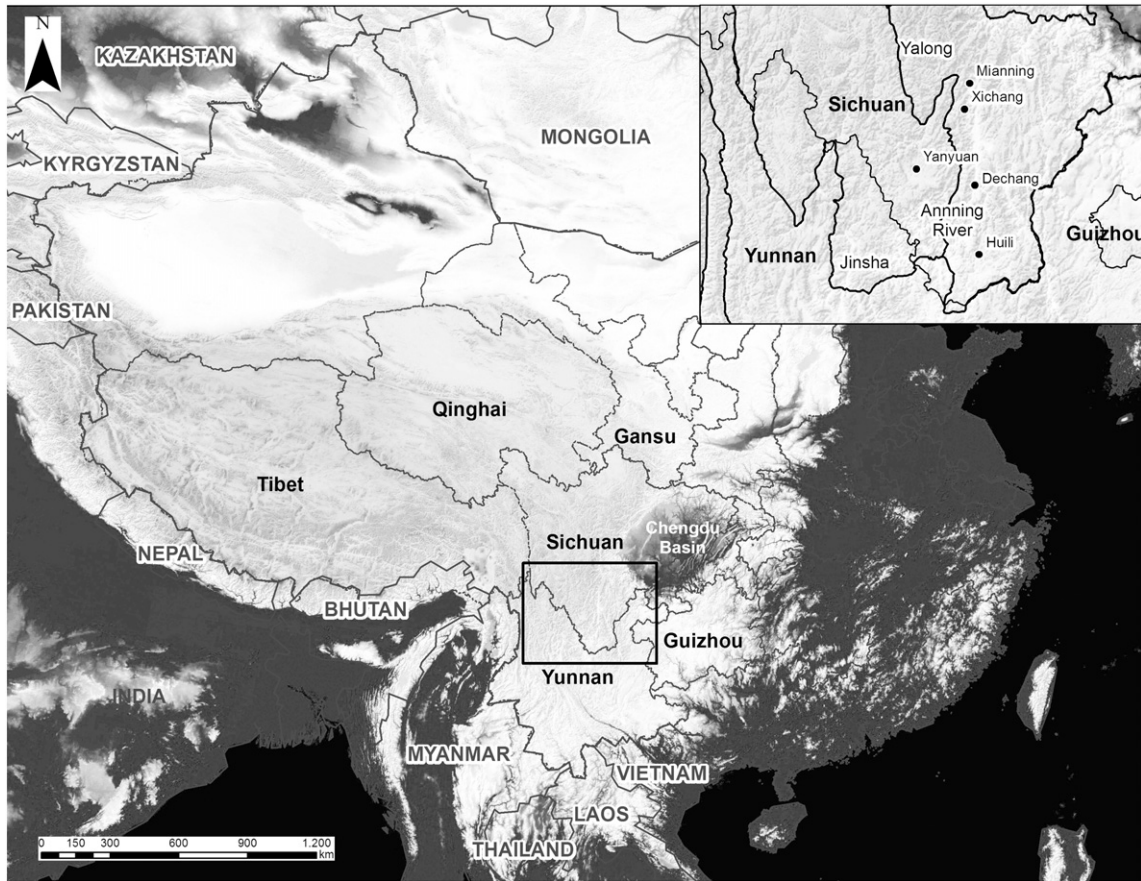


Fig. 1. Location of the Liangshan Region within East Asia.

valley measures around 11 km and the riverbed can be as wide as 1 km but is much narrower along its upper and lower reaches. Over time, the riverbed has moved gradually west, altering the geography and the archeological record significantly.

Being the main agricultural strip of the Liangshan Region, the landscape in this plain has been transformed heavily by human hands, and nowadays only secondary and tertiary vegetation of agricultural crops, low scrubs, and some deciduous trees can be seen. Rich “purple soils”, as they are called, are widely distributed and can bear up to two crops of rice a year (Wang et al., 2009). The most fertile patches of earth are located east of the Yalongjiang around Xichang, and the temperate climate with marked but mild wet and dry seasons, warm winters, mild summers, a high sunshine intensity, and abundant rain, allow for a large variety of produce. The main mineral resources are hematite, iron, copper, limestone, and kaolin, but they are mainly located in the lower reaches of the river, while the most important resources of the area are its fertile soil, favorable climate, and abundant water resources contained in multiple rivers, lakes, and ample rainfall.

### 1.2. History of archeological research in the Anning River Valley

Archeological research in the Liangshan Region commenced only in the 1970s, concentrating mainly on the Anning River Valley (Sichuansheng and Anninghe, 1976). Until the mid-1980s, research focused on the most conspicuous of local remains, the megalithic graves that are found only in the Anning River Valley and the eastern mountains in Puge and Xide (Liangshan Yizu, 1987). This period also saw a first survey of Liangshan Prefecture and Panzhihua City revealing a broad range of different features and site types. While excavation work basically ceased after the mid-1980s, the Anning River Valley continued to be explored in further surveys, providing a fairly good

overview of the distribution of early remains (Sichuansheng and Sichuansheng, 1990).

The main scholarly discussions during these first two phases of research ranged around questions of chronology and ethnic attribution of the different types of graves. The lack of a chronological framework for the Liangshan Region was felt increasingly and acutely, and when fieldwork commenced again in the late 1990s, the focus shifted to settlement sites whose stratigraphy might provide a basis for establishing a local chronological sequence. Unfortunately, most sites discovered so far consist of one single thin cultural layer, but a small number of multi-layered sites<sup>1</sup> combined with a few radiocarbon dates and typological comparisons with finds from neighboring regions with well-established chronologies have allowed for developing a chronological framework (Hein, forthcoming-a, Table 1).

Until recently, the main sources of information in Southwest China have been preliminary excavation reports published in sometimes obscure journals, but since the mid-2000s, the situations have improved considerably. In 2009, the Sichuan volumes of the Chinese Cultural Relics Series appeared, summarizing the discoveries from the first two National Cultural Relics Surveys and smaller local survey and excavation projects (Zhongguo Wenwuju, 2009). A volume summarizing and evaluating all megalithic graves from the Anning River Valley had already been compiled in 2006 (Sichuansheng et al., 2006), and in 2012 a book containing reprints of all previous reports on material from the Anning River Valley has become available (Liangshan et al., 2012). Nevertheless, much material was never reported in full or remains completely unpublished.

<sup>1</sup> These sites are Dechang Dongjiapo, Mianning Sanfentun, Xichang Dayangdui, Henglangshan, Lizhou, MimiLang, Qimugou, and Yingpanshan.

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