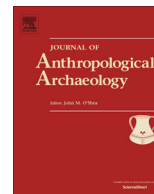




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# Bronze Age wetland/scapes: Complex political formations in the humid subtropics of southwest China, 900–100 BC



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## ABSTRACT

The reconstruction of complex political formations in tropical and subtropical environments has long been challenged by the ephemeral nature of archaeological deposits and the detectability of a settlement hierarchy. This paper presents findings from systematic archaeological surveys in the Lake Dian basin in southwest China to evaluate processes of political differentiation during the Bronze Age (ca. BC 900–100) and identified with the protohistoric kingdom of Dian. We discuss the problems of interpreting political consolidation based on mono-centers and ranked site size distributions. Our approach considers the contingent forms that ‘built’ landscapes can take in the humid subtropics in an effort to understand the variable relationship between politics and spatial scale. Combining traditional survey as well as subsurface methods suited for intensively worked paddy landscapes, we discuss the emergence and timing of multiple nucleated settlements as indicative of peer polity dynamics in the basin and examine the formation histories of large shell mound sites to highlight physical modifications that embedded central places during the Bronze Age period. We show that the boundary between on-site and off-site, living and non-living spaces is not solely determined by the availability of prime land but also by spatial conventions with discrete cultural and historical ramifications. By contextualizing macroscale views on complexity with an understanding of local scales of landscape transformation, we provide an alternative to models of pristine state formation based in temperate alluvial environments.

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## 1. Introduction

Tropics and highlands are often associated with environmental conditions thought to constrain complex-polity formation. These zones have historically been perceived as marginal or peripheral to the development of classic or pristine states in temperate riverine valleys, where open landscapes with alluvium soils allow for the possibility of agricultural intensification and population expansion (Bacus and Lucero, 1999; McIntosh, 1999). Monsoonal ecosystems with dense vegetation, by contrast, are associated with less intensive cultivation regimes such as swiddening, a spatially dispersed farming practice that do not lend to the formation of large permanent communities or to the development of leadership and territorial politics. Despite recent efforts to dislodge a study of political complexity from ecological determinism in pre-Columbian Americas (Stahl, 2006; Erickson and Balée, 2006; Lucero, 2006; Heckenberger et al., 2003) and Africa (McIntosh, 1999), archaeological investigations in the tropical and subtropical highlands of mainland and peninsular Asia remain hampered by

the absence of landscape configurations illustrative of settlement hierarchies, urbanism, and centralization. With a few noted exceptions (Stark, 2006; Kim, 2013), statecraft appears mainly as a later Indic introduction in the 5th c. AD and largely confined to lowland regions of Southeast Asia (Coedès, 1968; Glover, 1998; Vickery, 1998).

Instead of focusing on integrated settlement systems—correspondent with temperate models of state formation—we approach the problem of complexity in these zones through a reappraisal of “built” environments in our archaeological survey of the southwest massif in China (Fig. 1). Moving outside of broad alluvial basins, we consider alternative ways of conceiving a “built” space in the humid subtropics. We focus on the highland massif geographically situated between south China and tropical Southeast Asia, an ecology simultaneously shaped by the Indian monsoon and the Himalayan uplift. In a geography distinguished by high rainfall, extensive vegetation cover, and elevations of 1500–2500 m, we consider the implications this circumscribed ecosystem has for understanding models of political development, in particular by attending to the varied spatial relations between topography, soil, and land use that create a “built” and inhabitable landscape.

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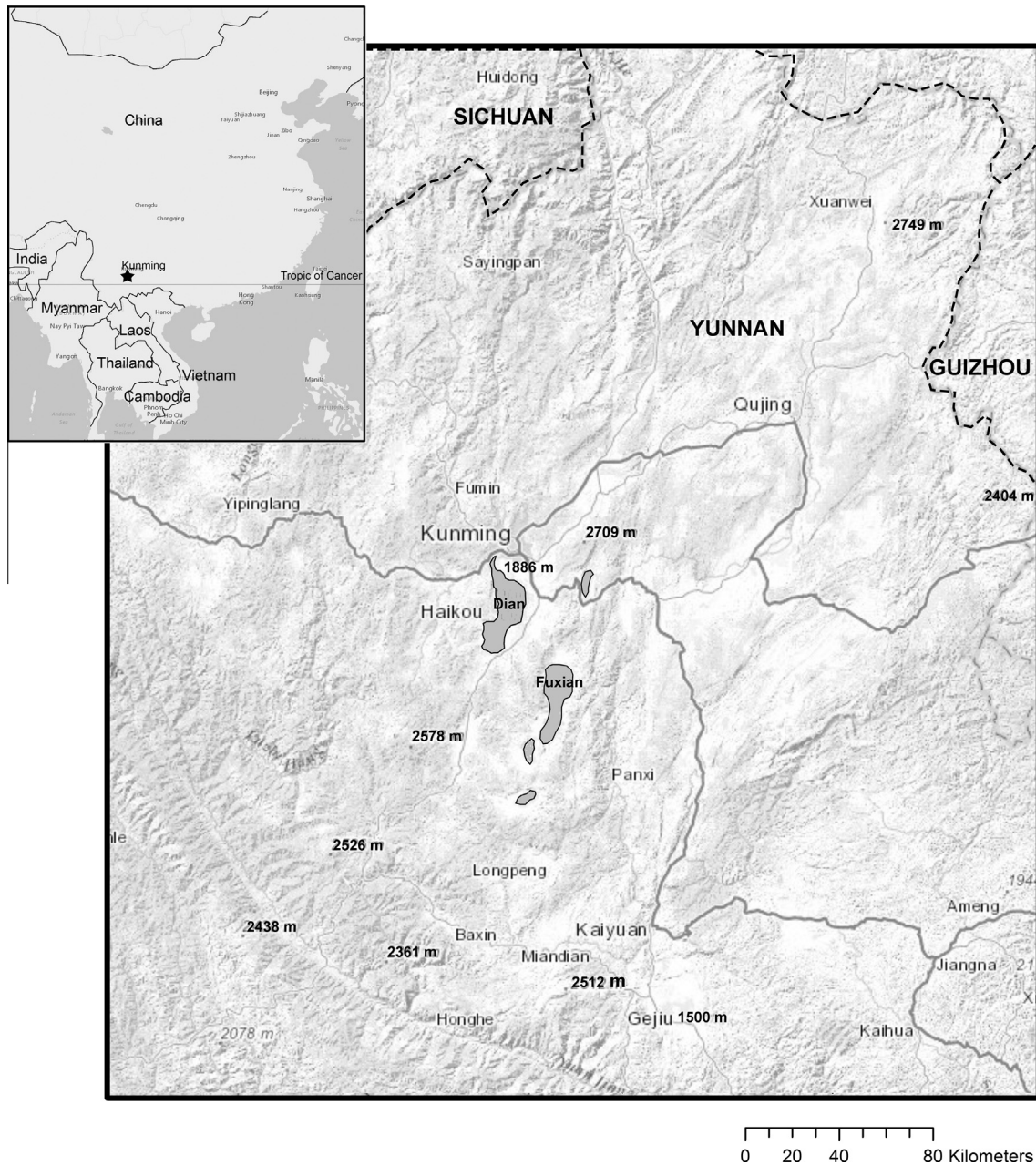


Fig. 1. Map of southwest massif in China and location of study region.

Archaeological explorations in the Lake Dian basin of southwest China (Fig. 1), an extension of the Himalayan plateau, offer a unique case to examine this problem. Textual and archaeological materials have substantiated the presence of a powerful polity called the “Dian.” Tantalizing evidence of this kingly polity emerged in 1958 with the discovery of an opulent grave at Shizhaishan (Stone Hill Fortress) (Fig. 2: 4) bearing a gold seal with the inscription “King of Dian,” a gift bestowed by a Han emperor to a conquered “barbarian” leader in 109 BC. Third- to second-century BC Chinese texts refer to the presence of “kingly” authority in command of twenty thousand to thirty thousand soldiers and to a “center” denoted by the term *yi* (a walled town, city, administrative place with noble residence in Han lexics) (Wang, 1999; Falkenhausen, 2008). The Dian polity appeared to have presided in this basin during the first millennium BC and its political economy, as inferred from mortuary opulence and iconography of ritual

and feasting (Fig. 3), was ostensibly based on bronze production, stock-raising, and rice agriculture (Chiou-Peng, 2004; Allard, 1999, 2005; Yao and Jiang, 2012).

Archaeologists continue to debate whether the “Dian” was a consolidated polity with class-based society or a confederation of chiefdoms varying from simple to paramountcy (Higham, 1996; Tong, 1991; Allard, 1999; Murowchick, 2001). Arguing against a singular find of kingly seal bearing the title “king of Dian,” most archaeologists refrain from identifying the Dian as a “state” given the absence of a documented, hierarchical Bronze Age settlement system. Scholars of tribal histories, by contrast, do not discount the archaeological and iconographic data but find it difficult to link the Dian with later historical political entities in the region. Informed primarily by Chinese administrative documents, these discussions instead provide a view of the region as an environment with limited agricultural productivity, seeing the poor, shallow

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