Exploring Regionally Based History in Early China: The Xiang-Yi Plain as Case Study

A LECTURE BY DR. GLENGA CHAO, URSINUS COLLEGE

In the spirit of collaboration and discussion across sub-disciplines that this lecture and workshop series aims to achieve, this talk proposes that a regionally-based approach to the study of early China may provide a fruitful framework for interweaving archaeological and textual sources. In arguing for this approach, I lay out my definition of what regionally-based work means theoretically in an early Chinese context, drawing on methods used in both regional archaeological survey in China as well as regional history from later periods. Then, taking my region of research interest—the middle Han River valley in northern Hubei—as a case study, I survey types of source materials that can and ought to be analyzed in order to construct a regionally-based history. I finish with a discussion of some of the major benefits and challenges of my approach as I currently see them.

Glenda Chao is an Assistant Professor of History and East Asian Studies at Ursinus College. Her research focuses on the cultural history of the middle Han River valley and surrounding environs during the first millennium BCE. She is interested in interweaving archaeological and textual materials to write fresh narratives of the early China that point to potential new avenues of research on the history and archaeology of early empires, regionality in the ancient world, and the role of mortuary and daily rituals in the creation of local identities. She is also interested in the history of archaeology in China and its relationship with modern cultural memory and historical imagination. Her work has been published in the Proceedings of the International Conference on Chu Culture and Early Development of the Middle Reaches of the Yangzi River (2020), and she is currently working on manuscripts about methods for approaching the study of first millennium BCE cemeteries in the Han River valley and the ethics of using unprovenienced archaeological materials in research about early China. Her book project focuses on the early regional history of the Xiang-Yi plain in northern Hubei; in this project, she seeks to explore the long-term processes by which this region became integrated (and also perhaps resisted integration) into the Qin and Han empires.

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