Preface

What Does “Defining Chu” Mean?

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Exhausted and corrupt, a state called Chu collapsed in 223 BCE under military pressure from a northwestern state called Qin. Chu had been pushed out of its homeland in central China by the expanding state of Qin over the course of the Warring States period, 481–221 BCE. By the time of its defeat in 223 BCE, Chu existed only in the newly conquered eastern and southern fringes of its formerly massive territory. The military thrust of northern and western peoples to the resource-rich lands of the south and east began with the Zhou over a millennium earlier. By the time China’s first empire was established by Qin, the different peoples from all corners of the ancient Chinese world would have experienced a long history of interaction and mutual influence. Chu peoples, originally located just southeast of the Zhou homeland in modern Shaanxi Province, had likewise been both the subject and object of military and diplomatic intercourse for hundreds of years before their self-proclaimed status as a legitimate kingdom.

After the disintegration of Zhou lineage domination in the eighth century BCE, the Chu polity grew in strength and began its own campaigns for military domination of the east and south. In the process Chu became a conduit for intercourse between peoples of all regions. Before Chu was crushed by the Qin it had, at its military peak, threatened to dominate all of early China. Despite its political defeat, the intense cultural mix that had become identified with the Chu polity over the course of history was reinvented by the Han emperors after the short-lived Qin rule. In order to provide a spiritual and romantic antidote to the harsh laws of the Qin, Han period writers were encouraged to preserve the images and songs of what they remembered as Chu, an exotic shamanistic culture of southern and southeastern barbarians. The Han established a subkingdom named Chu near the ancestral burial ground of
its first emperor; its capital, Pengcheng (modern Xuzhou, Jiangsu), became a center of Daoist and early Buddhist cult activity. This eastern kingdom, along with the southern kingdom of Changsha, established around the mythic Dongting Lake region in modern Hunan, represented for the Han the spirit of Chu. It is the image of this spirit that has persisted up to modern times and what we will use as a foil against which to compare the image of a real Chu, one currently emerging from the material remains—texts, tombs, and cities—excavated from the original territory of the Chu state in the Han River valley in modern Hubei and Henan.²

Much of our book is devoted to describing and analyzing the Warring States period construction of the Chu polity as it moved farther and farther from its original homeland, absorbing as it went the customs and culture of the peoples it dominated. Eventually, over the course of the book, we see the emergence of the constructed Chu image from historical reality—a reality argued according to each author's interpretation of archaeological or historical materials that they accept as defining Chu.

Chu culture—a complexity of institutions and beliefs that evolved over time—has fascinated the Chinese since the Han period. This book is simply an attempt to present for the Western reader a glimpse of the twentieth-century image of Chu, as presented in a recent flurry of articles and books by archaeologists and scholars.³ It is impossible for one book adequately to represent the entire field of Chu studies—our debt is too great. We leave the analysis of the post-Han images of Chu as a topic for specialists in those periods. We shall simply express here our gratitude to those interpreters of pre-Qin data who came before us and paved the road to this book. Noel Barnard and K. C. Chang in particular have produced studies critical to our emerging understanding of Chu. As early as 1959, long before the discovery of the Mawangdui tomb complex in 1972, Barnard called for “a complete re-appraisal of the culture of this ‘barbarian’ state.”⁴ In that same year, K. C. Chang published a study of Neolithic archaeological material that connected the early cultural history of south China to the larger archaeological context of Pacific Basin cultures.⁵ Barnard added to this effort in 1974 with an unsurpassed edited volume of scholarly research on the links between the arts of these cultures.⁶ His 1973 work on the Chu Silk Manuscript influenced a number of chapters in this volume;⁷ we are proud to include in our own book Li Ling’s masterful translation of that very difficult and recalcitrant document.

The discovery of southern texts from tombs during this century, such as the Chu Silk Manuscript and the Mawangdui Han tomb materials, revealed the sophistication of the south but at the same time reinforced the traditional image of a literate Chu culture centered in the Changsha region; archaeological materials discovered in recent decades have radically altered that view, and our review of the present state of the field reflects the influence of this new material. It is in answer to Barnard’s original call for a reappraisal of the evidence, and in response to K. C. Chang’s plea for the integrated study of cultures past and present,⁸ that we dedicate the effort of this book.

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