

# View from the East Mountain: An Examination of the Relationship between the Dong Son and Lake Tien Civilizations in the First Millennium B.C.

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THE DONG SON ("East Mountain") Bronze Age culture of the Red River delta of northern Viet Nam has been known since the 1930s. The original finds date to the colonial period and were handsomely described by Goloubew (1929, 1937) and Janse (1958). They include the now familiar and characteristic bronze drums and weapons, burial situlae (bucket-shaped ceramic and bronze vessels), and concentric decorative motifs. Subsequent research, including a plethora of recent work by the Vietnamese themselves (Hoang and Bui 1980), reveals the Dong Son cultural complex as a northern center of a widespread bronze/iron complex found throughout Viet Nam and the rest of Southeast Asia. It represents an *in situ* development from preceding Neolithic phases in the vicinity of the Red, Ma, and Ca river systems.

Between 1955 and 1960, 50 tombs were discovered at Shizhai Shan, Jinning, in Yunnan Province (Fig. 1). This far-distant region was known as the kingdom of Tien during the western Han period (206 B.C.–A.D. 9). The archaeological investigations revealed a rich Bronze Age culture with multiform affinities, including some with the roughly contemporaneous Dong Son to the southeast. Continuing excavations in Yunnan and western Sichuan have greatly expanded both the geographical and material cultural bases of Tien society, but its relationships to contemporary first-millennium B.C. chiefdoms and states in northern Southeast Asia remains hazy. The purpose of this paper is to systematically explore the links between the Lake Tien complex in Yunnan Province and the Dong Son cultural complex of northern Viet Nam.

## NORTHERN VIET NAM

The Red River delta in northern Viet Nam has been the subject of much speculation regarding indigenous political development. Traditional views, based largely on

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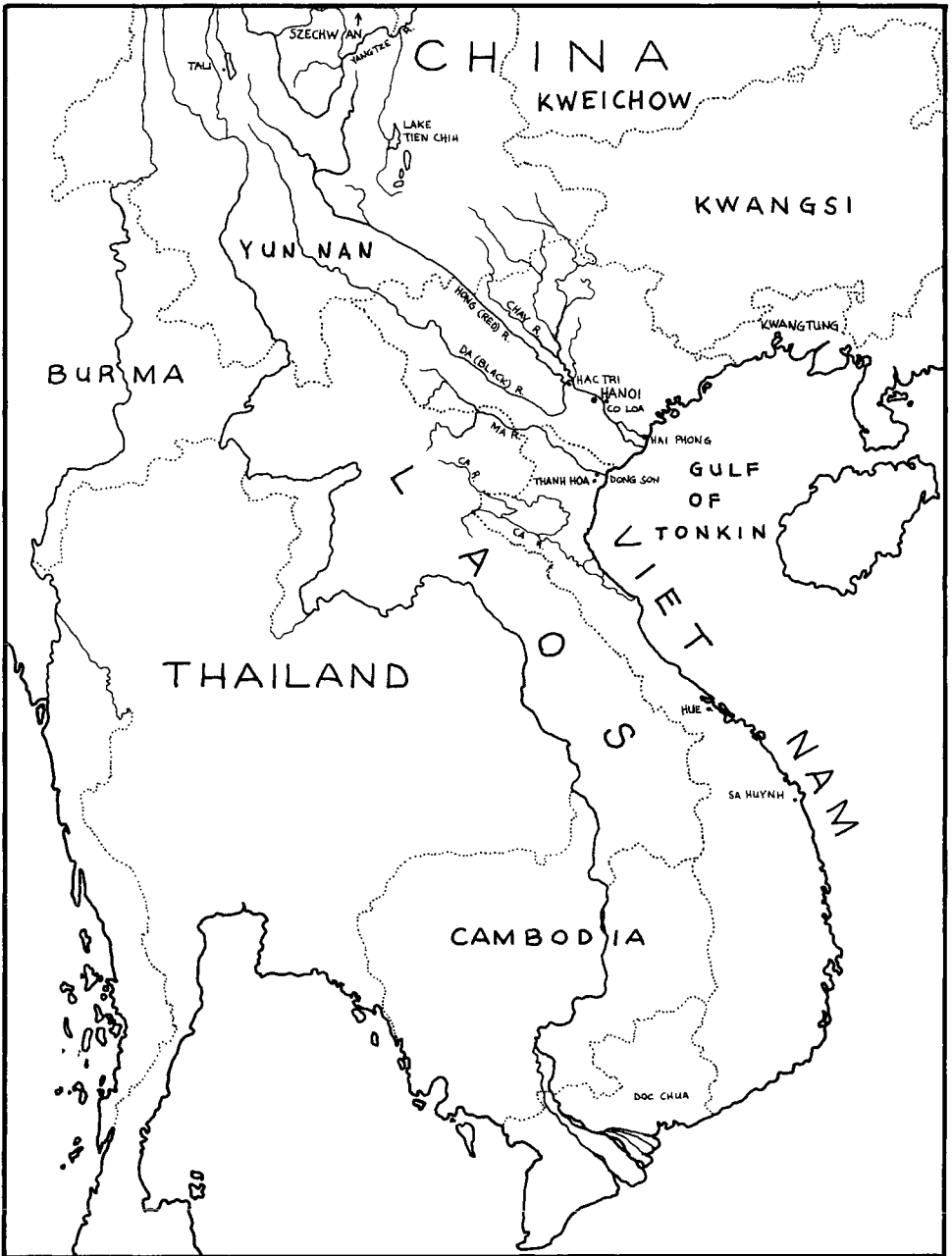


Fig. 1. Viet Nam and neighboring countries.

archaeological work done during the French colonial period, held that Viet Nam had a primitive level of culture at the time that it was successfully annexed by China in the first century A.D., or that it was basically a loan culture, learning agriculture and metalworking from outside sources. More recent archaeological work, however—in addition to a concerted effort on the part of Vietnamese historians, folklorists, and

archaeologists to seek political-cultural roots that antedate the Han period—has resulted in an interpretation of early state development that correlates legendary beginnings with hard physical evidence (Pham Huy Thong 1983).

O'Harrow (1979:140) argues that ethnohistory and archaeology must be at each other's service to provide a reasonable historical outline of Vietnamese society leading up to the first extensive imposition of Chinese power in the area in the first century B.C. He coins the term *Proto-Vietnamese* in reference to the group or groups of Yuch people in the Red River delta and its environs, stretching northward into southern Guangdong and Guangxi and southward through coastal Thanh Hoa Province (142). They are the people who share the material culture illustrated by Dong Son and related finds—a people who were the heirs, in the second half of the first millennium B.C., to the antecedent neolithic Phung Nguyen Culture, and whose domain appears to have been congruent with the protohistorical state of Van Lang.

The Phung Nguyen Culture is divided into three periods—Phung Nguyen, Dong Dau, and Go Mun—which commence as early as 3000 B.C. and terminate in the first half of the first millennium B.C. The first half of the culture has an elaborate stone technology, ornaments of jadeite, weaving, and elaborately decorated wheel-thrown pottery; many of the geometric decorations appear ancestral to the later Dong Son motifs. By the second millennium B.C., bronze metallurgy was well developed, with artifact types and techniques similar to material from northeast Thailand (Bayard 1980:97).

Phung Nguyen sites are distributed over a large area that includes the plains and part of the mountains; they concentrate densely at the intersection of the Red and Black rivers at Hac Tri, just north of Ha Noi. So far over 30 sites have been identified. Rice grains and the bones of pigs, chickens, and cattle dating to the third millennium B.C. have been recovered. That these animals were probably domesticated is further indicated by the presence of baked clay figurines of cattle, dogs, pigs, and chickens in the archaeological assemblage (Nguyen B. K. 1980:27–44; Hoang and Bui 1980:56–57).

Perhaps the most important thing about Phung Nguyen culture is the evidence it affords for the indigenous beginnings of Vietnamese civilization. Previously the traditional kingdom of Van Lang (2800–700 B.C.) and the Vuong Hung dynasty (700–258 B.C.) were viewed as legendary. The Phung Nguyen sites, which coincide with the Me Linh region attributed to the kingdom, give archaeological support for the presence of an advanced society in the area well before the Chinese contacts of the second and first centuries B.C. While the dates of the kings are subject to question, they nevertheless overlap with the dates assigned to the culture complex. Nguyen Ba Khoach (1980:47–49) suggests that in all likelihood the formation, development, and end of the kingdom of Van Lang ranges somewhere along the continuum from late Phung Nguyen to Dong Son (1100–300 B.C.).

According to the Vietnamese origin myth (recorded in the fifteenth century), Van Lang was ruled by the Hung kings, who claimed descent from Lac Long Quan (Lac Dragon Lord), a hero who came to the Red River plains from his home in the sea; he subdued all evil demons in the land and civilized the people, teaching them to cultivate rice and to wear clothes. Lac Long Quan and Au Co (wife of an intruder from the north) are regarded by the Vietnamese as the progenitors of their race. In another version, the oldest son of Au Co's 50 children was chosen to be king of the country of Van Lang. The country was then divided into 15 sections, with a brother of the king governing each section.

Taylor (1983:3), citing a Vietnamese study, suggests that the name *Hung* derives from an Austroasiatic title of chieftainship, while *Van Lang* is associated with phonetically similar words that mean “people” and, by extension, “nation.” Thus the legend may not represent the history of a single dynasty or kingdom so much as the consolidation of clans or tribes into chiefdoms. According to Wheatley (1983:11), “chiefdoms exhibit in their respective degrees relatively permanent, centralized leadership and hereditary hierarchical status arrangements informed by an aristocratic ethos.” The archaeological evidence for the Phung Nguyen through Dong Son periods suggests an evolution from a communal life built up from aggregations of clans and tribes to a more hierarchical society based on relatively small village or family groups. Grave sites from the Dong Son period, rich with bronze burial goods, indicate that clear distinctions existed in society between the ruling class and the ruled. It is this period of society, at a level of political integration based on supra-local ties and at least some degree of hierarchy, that Vietnamese scholars identify as the time of the Hung kings and the kingdom of Van Lang.

### DONG SON

Dong Son style is the classic expression of prehistoric and protohistoric bronze metallurgy in Southeast Asia, and objects in the style occur in Thailand, peninsular Malaysia, Indochina, and on through Indonesia to as far as the western tip of Irian Jaya. Dong Son is known primarily from bronze objects; iron, while present in the more important mainland sites, was used primarily for utilitarian tools and weapons without decoration. The most famous artifact is the drum of bronze with a flat top, bulbous rim, straight sides and splayed foot, which has been found throughout the whole area of distribution (Pham Minh Huyen et al. 1987; Kempers 1988). The designs on these highly ornamented bronze drums reflect a sea-oriented society. They have been found with the rich and important burial assemblages at the eponymous site of Dong Son near Thanh Hoa, at Viet Khe near Hai Phong, and also at Shizhai Shan near Lake Tien in Yunnan. In decoration the drums offer both great expertise and a high degree of social and ritual documentation for an otherwise mainly prehistoric period (Bellwood 1979:183–189).

Other bronze artifacts at Dong Son include situlae with bands of Dong Son motifs, miniature situlae, miniature bells and spool-shaped objects, socketed axes, boot-shaped axes, socketed spearheads and arrowheads, socketed spades or hoes, tanged arrowheads, and daggers. The bronze objects also include bracelets, belt hooks and buckles, and ornamental square and rectangular plaques that may have been sewn onto clothing (Bellwood 1979:187). In addition, there are ceramic spindle whorls, grooved net sinkers, and pottery. The decorative elements of the Dong Son pottery tradition are directly in the northern Vietnamese tradition, belonging to the early cord-marked tradition of the southwest (Pearson 1962:37–40).

The Dong Son site has been described by Jansz (1958) and Goloubew (1937). The depth of cultural material indicates that the site existed for a long time before contact with the Ch'in and Han Chinese. The type site, located in Thanh Hoa Province along the Ma River, includes both dwellings and burials. The remains of stilt houses with thatch roofs were reconstructed. In the second layer of the site, bronze items were found. The usual grave deposit at Dong Son includes a few bronze weapons, such as spears, arrowheads, and axes, as well as drums, bells, spittoons, situlae

(often in miniature), and sometimes a sword or dagger of iron. The bronze figures of Dong Son, often forming the handles of daggers, have long hair gathered at the neck, a breechcloth, circular breasts, and hands on the hips. The drums always feature a star-shaped design on the beating surface and are sometimes ceremoniously killed. The decorative motifs are varied but usually feature concentric designs, long-beaked birds, musicians, and ceremonial scenes of great complexity. Chinese trade items occur in small amounts in the upper layers (Pearson 1962:29–31).

The total corpus of material from the Dong Son site provides a fairly full definition of the culture, and the site still seems to be the richest reported for its period in northern Viet Nam (Bellwood 1979:188). By 1979 a total of 90 Dong Son sites had been identified from the Red, Ma, and Ca river deltas. It is apparent that Dong Son sites were used for both living and burial and form a recognizable culture that lasted for more than 2000 years. For the Vietnamese, Dong Son represents the northern center of a widespread bronze/early iron complex. Dong Son was the climax of the late bronze/iron culture in the three deltas of the northern lowland plains. Other non-Dong Son centers have been identified in central and southern Viet Nam at Sa Huynh and Doc Chua (Hoang and Bui 1980).

It has been suggested that the need to control the waters of the Red River delta region provided the impetus for greater cooperation and ultimately, state formation (Nguyen Duy Hinh 1984:185). According to Taylor (1983:12–13), *Lac* (“ditch” or “canal”) is the earliest recorded name for the Vietnamese people, and thus it is appropriate to refer to the Dong Son Culture as Lac society. The presence of tidal irrigation reveals a relatively advanced agricultural technology, greatest in the Tay Vu area, the lowland center of Lac field society. Grains of the earliest strain of rice found in Asia (*Oryza fatua*) have been excavated from the oldest Neolithic cultures in all parts of modern Viet Nam. The ancient Vietnamese worked the land with hoes of polished stone; as early as the second half of the second millennium B.C., sickles and other reaping implements had bronze blades; by the Dong Son period, hoes, plowshares, and scythe blades were made of bronze. The economy of the Lac period was based on wet riziculture; use was made of draft animals. The skills of the farmers were sufficient to support a clearly defined ruling class.

The Hung kings were firmly in control only of the Me Linh region at the confluence of the Red River and its two great tributaries, the Da and the Chay, at the point where the Red River emerges from the mountains. Beyond this the Hung kings were to some degree dependent upon the cooperation of the Lac lords. The Hung kings seemingly protected the Lac lords against raids and invasions from the mountains, while the Lac lords supported the Hung kings with their manpower and wealth. Henri Maspero (1918:9), conjecturing from the upland societies of northern Viet Nam in his day, described this as a hierarchical society based on hereditary privilege, mutual obligation, and personal loyalty. The people lived in villages or small kinship communities under the rule of Lac lords. The Lac lords enjoyed different levels of privilege and authority, from village headmen up to regional leaders who personally advised the Hung kings. The Hung kings maintained their prestige with a prosperous court life that facilitated peaceful relations with neighboring mountain peoples. Legendary traditions and excavated Dong Son tombs tend to confirm this picture of Lac society. Lac society was relatively advanced and apparently self-contained. It had developed far from the expanding political centers of north China and south India and was equal to any threat arising from surrounding

territories. This situation began to unravel with the arrival of Chinese power on the South China Sea in the fourth century B.C.

Most scholars have stressed the important position of women in Lac society (Maspero 1918:12; Taylor 1983:13; O'Harrow 1979:159). In all likelihood a bilateral or bilinear family system existed, in which inheritance rights could be passed through both maternal and paternal sides. This would have significant implications for later Chinese political control (e.g., the revolt of the Trung Sisters in 40 A.D.).

In 257 B.C. An Duong Vuong dethroned the last Hung king, and the kingdom of Van Lang ceased to exist. Traditional Vietnamese historiography relates that An Duong Vuong came from Pa Shu (usually thought to be in modern Sichuan). The succeeding Au Lac kingdom represents a fusion of invading Ou (borderland) lords and the resident Lac lords and suggests the union of the Vietnamese of the highlands with those of the plains. Au Lac represents a shift, both geographically and politically. The new headquarters were transferred from the midlands to Tay Vu, the traditional area of Lac strength.

An Duong Vuong is traditionally thought to have been the builder of Co Loa, from where he ruled until his defeat at the hands of Trieu Da, ruler of the kingdom of Nan Yueh. Co Loa citadel was built to reflect a society committed to defense of both land and seas, and capable of an economic base to support such undertakings. Its dimensions are impressive—the circumference of the outermost of its three ramparts is some 8 km. The complex consists of nine earthen ramparts walled in the shape of a snail shell, containing a military encampment, a central market, and some sort of administrative-religious structure of fired brick and tiles. Reinforced with guard towers and defensive works, the walls attain a height of 3–4 m and are complemented by extensive moatlike ditches leading to the river Hoang, which were apparently intended to facilitate coordination of land and water-borne defenses. The use of kiln-fired bricks and tile in the citadel's construction, as well as the considerable finds of metal weapons in the surrounding area, can only reinforce the impression one gains of a people quite dissimilar to those whom the Chinese uncomplimentarily describe in their contacts (O'Harrow 1979: *passim*). Co Loa represents a tightly organized social and political unit, committed to and capable of defending its interests. The existence of the considerable fortress of Co Loa has led O'Harrow (1986:256–257) to speculate beyond the suggested notions of political unity and alliance to some form of common language for communication throughout the region in pre-Chinese times.

The evidence from the Red and Ma river deltas of northern Viet Nam, then, is unequivocal. Current reviews of Vietnamese archaeology (Davidson 1975; Nguyen Phuc Long 1975; Ha 1980) confirm pre-Han chiefdoms or protostates during the middle of the first millennium B.C. The Dong Son period shows the beginning of political centralization and the establishment of the traditional Van Lang kingdom, previously regarded as legendary. From 500 B.C. onward Van Lang society demonstrates an increasingly hierarchical organization, shown by individual tombs of varying degrees of opulence. Bronze art and technology reached a zenith (bronze drums); iron and lacquer appeared subsequently, evidence of specialized craft workshops. Dong Son itself was an active port city on the Ma River with contacts throughout Southeast Asia. Large-scale irrigation works occur in the Red River delta at this time with accompanying agricultural technological advancements in bronze and iron. The construction of Co Loa citadel (c. 225 B.C.) confirms the requisite economic,

social, political, and linguistic sophistication necessary for state formation. Davidson (1979:305) concludes that by 208 B.C. the town as a political, social, and economic space was well established in the Red River delta, enabling both city dwellers (non-producing class) and peasants to achieve a symbiotic relationship.

Even by the mid-second century B.C., when nominal Nan Yueh hegemony was installed over the lands of the Vietnamese, emphasis should be placed on the small-scale nature of these operations in all their phases (as traders with few resident Chinese). No archaeological remnants have yet come to light to support any assumption of large-scale Chinese-style occupation or enterprise in northern Viet Nam during this period. Objects found in Dong Son tombs suggest a certain level of trade with the north, but most objects are of local manufacture, made of local materials and in the local idiom. Lac lords continued to rule in a more or less unobstructed fashion at this time. We witness the slow evolution of the relationship from one of a purely trading variety to one of tribute. The year 111 B.C. and the fall of the Nan Yueh kingdom are usually viewed as the point at which Viet Nam was integrated loosely into the Chinese Han empire as Chiao Chih (Red River delta), Chiu Chen (Thanh Hoa), and Jih Nan (Hue). But it wasn't until 43 A.D., with the defeat of the Trung Sisters and the alliance of the 65 citadels, that actual Han military and administrative control was established.

#### SOUTHWESTERN YUNNAN AND THE TIEN CIVILIZATION

Some 50 tombs were discovered between 1955 and 1960 at Shizhai Shan along the eastern periphery of Lake Tien in Yunnan Province. Known as the Kingdom of Tien during the Western Han period (206 B.C.–A.D. 9), this civilization was shown to have possessed a Bronze Age culture hitherto entirely unknown to archaeologists and historians of Han China. Since 1955, other excavations in Yunnan have helped to complete and corroborate these rich findings. A Bronze Age sepulcher anterior to the Shizhai tombs was excavated in the village of Dapona, southeast of Dali, in 1964. Within a radius of 40 km of Jinning, two other sites of the same period, also appertaining to the kingdom of Tien, have come to light: Taiji Shan in 1964 (17 tombs) and Lijia Shan in 1972 (27 tombs). In the same region another 117 tombs from Shibeicun have been excavated in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Dewall 1984:215).

In view of the relatively sparse textual evidence of contemporary Han historians, the tombs discovered around Lake Tien form a particularly precious source of information. The Tien civilization, in the light of archaeological findings, historical sources, and some ethnological comparisons, is characterized by a specific group of material goods and cultural features. These include the importance of livestock (horses and cattle), the form and the decoration of the habitat, the dress, the war customs, some survivals of "mother right," headhunting, some human sacrifice, the use of the bronze drum, an aristocratic taste for adornment, and an entire animal repertory both symbolic and decorative, as well as a feeling for particular combinations of geometric patterns (Pirazzoli-T'Serstevens 1979:125).

The Shizhai Shan site itself is 19 miles south of Jinning in Yunnan. The site was probably once an island in Tien Chih Lake. Some grain impressions have been found on contemporary potsherds, but for this period the remains consist almost solely of burials (Pearson 1962:27–29). The 20 richest graves of Shizhai Shan might have been those of the king of Tien and his clan. The burial customs, together with the

style and technique of the finds in these graves, indicate a chronologically short evolution, dating this royal cemetery to a time within the Western Han period, between 150–120 B.C. and 86 B.C., the year of the first of a series of revolts and heavy repressions which followed initial Chinese colonization. Among the dramatic items uncovered here was a Chinese seal, bearing the inscription of the Kingdom of Tien.

At Shizhai Shan 706 implements were reported—558 bronze, 92 iron, 43 stone, and 13 clay (spindle whorls), including 21 plows. The bronze implements include plows, hoes, saws, axes, adzes, chisels, sickles, and knives. The relatively large number of adzes, axes, and knives—practical items—of iron suggests a high level of indigenous technological development. The metal inventory also included: two kinds of halberds, five kinds of lance, two-edged swords, fan-shaped axes, crescent-bladed axes, picks, arrowpoints, gilt belt hooks, mirrors, bronze bird ornaments with shell and turquoise inlay, shovels, crossbows, and sets of bells (Chang 1977: 458–463; Dewall 1979; Pearson 1962:27–29).

The bronzes, including both models and drums, not only display sophisticated art and technological skill but also have been a major source for the reconstruction of Bronze Age Tien society. One bronze drum, for example, had 41 figures in the round standing on the top. Another illustrates a chieftainess enthroned, and another a religious cult which includes human sacrifice and a pillar, with snakes around the top and a tiger surmounting it. The incised decoration on the side of the drum shows priests, shamans, and magicians with high conical hats, ringing bells and dancing (Pearson 1962:28). One miniature drum with an animal on top has been traced to Dong Son.

Using these figurative and plastic representations in conjunction with the archaeological and ethnohistorical records, we can conclude that the population of Tien in its final period practiced irrigation agriculture. Cattle, sheep, dogs, horses, chickens, and pigs are depicted in the decorative and plastic art and so must have played a role in the economy. Horses were used for riding and warfare; cattle were probably used ceremonially for meat. Dogs were probably used for hunting and as a food source. The handicrafts of Tien culture no doubt included the production of wine ware, bronze and iron metallurgy, opal work, and leather work. The horizontal loom is depicted, so weaving was known, with domesticated hemp as the source of fabric. In addition, a sophisticated set of daily utensils is depicted (Chang 1977:458–463).

Hundreds of thousands of cowrie shells were found in drum-shaped containers within some tombs, indicating both widespread and profitable trade and exchange. Market scenes are often depicted in the plastic art of Tien. Some of the coins, mirrors, lacquers, *ko* halberds, arrowheads, and *chi* halberds were imported from northern China. The pile dwellings, shown in the plastic models, are thatch-roofed habitations with two stories, an upper level for people, a lower level for animals (Chang 1977:458–463).

A socially stratified society seems likely, with three classes distinguished based on hairstyle and dress: the aristocracy and the rich, freemen, and slaves. The large number of weapons, horse and chariot fittings of bronze, and the depiction of violent scenes (including some of torture) in the plastic art all indicate the presence of warfare on some scale. Luxury goods include ornaments of gold, silver, jade, opal, turquoise, and lacquerware. Ritual scenes, many of which cannot yet be fully understood, are depicted in the bronze plastic models or on the bronze drums. Dancing



was probably a part of these rituals. Musical instruments include bronze kettle-drums, shen panpipes, flutes, and pien bells (Chang 1977: 458–463).

We do not know the origin or the pre-mature stage of this culture at this time. A study of its art (Bunker 1972; Dewall 1972) shows elements borrowed from Zhou China and from the animal style of the steppes. But in Shizhai Shan these elements appear to be perfectly assimilated and freely combined, which leads to the supposition that several previous sequences remain to be discovered. In the same way, the ethnic composition of this population of farmer-stockbreeders is not known. The influence from the steppes (i.e., the form and decoration of some of the weapons, representations of animal combats, geometrical associations), the importance of stock-breeding, and the proximity of itinerant tribes all raise the problem of a nomadic origin for at least a part of the population of Tien. In addition, the exact spread of Tien civilization remains difficult to delimit with accuracy.

From the archaeological point of view, the cultural domain of Tien cannot so far be defined beyond the locality of Shizhai Shan and the other closely associated sites. The preceding Neolithic phase in the area, with quite a number of sites around Lake Tien, presents a rather homogeneous cultural pattern, characterized by refuse layers of shellfish interspersed with sherds, predominantly of an untempered red-colored ware, and by a stepped type of stone axe not commonly found elsewhere in Yunnan. In all probability it is the favorable ecological environment—the lake and the arable land around it—that accounts for the distinction of this local Neolithic culture as compared to others further west (Dewall 1967: 8–9).

While direct links between the successive phases are missing in the region, other areas in Yunnan yield illustrative evidence to suggest the transition from Neolithic to Bronze Age as an oscillating local process rather than a change effected by wholesale importation. The Chalcolithic sites of Haimen Kou and of Ma Lung in the Tali region, the stray bronze finds within the Neolithic layers of Ma Chang, and the red copper finds within the bronze context of Dapona seemingly stand for the various stages in this process (Dewall 1967: 10). The relationship of the recently discovered, but as yet not fully reported, bronze finds in neighboring Sichuan Province is not known. At present we lack an overall framework for dating these finds on any other basis than inferences drawn from their material and typological features, which require the utmost caution.

With the finds of Shizhai Shan, we stand on firmer ground as far as chronology is concerned. The facts reported about the native kingdom of Tien by Han historiographers tally entirely with the archaeological results—agriculture as the basis of subsistence and permanent settlements, as suggested by the finds of plowshares, hoes, and similar farming tools and by models of houses built on stilts and of size to accommodate one family; and local chiefdoms paying tribute to the kingdom of Tien. The extreme wealth of some tomb furniture at Shizhai Shan probably represents the members of an upper class, the clansmen and councilors directly related to the royal court.

Later burials here and at Taiji Shan were more modest and indicate a distinctive social status for warrior nobility, identified by the position and association of grave goods (Dewall 1967: 14–19). In these tombs the typical agricultural tools are missing, as are the types that pertain so clearly to the influential economic position of those people buried in the larger tombs (e.g., the conspicuous cowrie containers of

drum shape or similar bronze vessels). Along with the more elaborately decorated bronzes and the fine figurines sculpted in the round, these are found only in the larger, wealthy graves. From the archaeological testimony there can be no doubt either that any of the Han-bartered goods actually filtered through the higher ranks of nobility who seem eagerly to have preserved their trade and status monopolies (Dewall 1967:19–20).

## DISCUSSION

The relationship between the Red River and Lake Tien cultures has not been systematically investigated. The earliest syntheses of Southeast Asian culture history derived the Dong Son style from eastern European “Pontic migrations” (Heine-Geldern 1937) or the middle Yangtze-based Ch’u civilization (Karlgren 1942). Similarly, Watson (1970) suggested that Yunnan was actually the center of development of the Dong Son style, from where the drums, pediform axes, and daggers were exported to the rest of Southeast Asia. Because the Shizhai Shan tombs appear to postdate the Chinese conquest in 109 B.C., Watson felt that Dong Son is therefore unlikely to be older than 100 B.C. This view is not supported by subsequent archaeological work and radiocarbon dates from Southeast Asia and Viet Nam (Bellwood 1979:189).

Pearson (1962:44–46) recognized the essential unity of the material culture of Shizhai Shan and Dong Son, especially in the drums and the weapons. In addition the full complement of Dong Son artifacts exists only in northern Indochina and southwestern China. The drums, hoes, daggers, axes, bracelets, and stone rings are the only items that spread to the wider areas of Southeast Asia. He observed, however, that the area assumed by many to be the region of Dong Son culture showed “no uniformity of culture” (44). Rather he found a nuclear area of productive, long-standing traditions with a large surrounding area. Dong Son was primarily a ceremonial and trading center at the heart of a stratified society, chiefdom or protostate. This was consonant with Janse’s idea (1958) of Dong Son as the first phase of the formation of a Vietnamese cultural unity.

In his description and analysis, Pearson recognized that at least at its center Dong Son was a true stratified society. The burials at both Dong Son and Shizhai Shan showed a group of people who obviously controlled great wealth, either in the form of cowries or bronze weapons and vessels. The position of the priestess or ruler is not unique in these societies; other individuals, on the basis of qualities other than physical strength and possession of magic, were able to differentiate themselves from the farmers (Pearson 1962:46).

The users of Dong Son implements in the hinterlands were egalitarian groups or rank societies, who acquired goods including bronzes through trade in the context of their prestige or redistributive economies. The adoption of irrigation in Yunnan and the loose inter-village structure would suggest that strong lineages were in operation there. These lineages had men of enough wealth to be able to purchase drums. In the Dong Son community, however, whole aggregates by inheritance had control of wealth (Pearson 1962:46). Pearson believed that the cowries were used in limited transactions—that Dong Son, through stimulus with the Ch’u state in the middle Yangtze region of southeast China, was turning only very slowly toward the integration brought about by a market economy.

Dewall (1967:17–20) echoes these notions in her discussion of Han-bartered goods filtering through the higher ranks of Shizhai Shan nobility as a mechanism for the preservation of trade and status monopolies. But the commercial infiltration from Chinese cultural and trading centers was not the only impact from the outside absorbed by the social elite, without affecting the lower strata. In the princely tombs of Shizhai Shan, striking alien features, in both metallurgical techniques and art styles, also tell of exchanges with the realm of the nomadic animal style in the north-west and with the Dong Son civilization in the southeast.

In an art historical analysis and comparison of the two cultures, Bunker (1972: 319–321) traced the characteristic pediform axe—of which numerous examples have been found in Yunnan and Indochina—to the Vietnamese Dong Son culture area. Further she dated the Shizhai Shan artifact assemblage to the Western Han period on the basis of the coins, seals, and mirrors recovered in archaeological context from late in the second century B.C. to the last quarter of the first century B.C.

Chang (1977:466–467) wrote that the importance of Shizhai Shan (and the nearby Taiji Shan and Lijia Shan sites) can hardly be overestimated. Their proximity to the classical site of Dong Son on the Gulf of Tonkin and the many stylistic similarities that these three sites share might indicate that they represent the same culture, characterized by the same stylistic elements: bronze kettledrums, fan-shaped and boot-shaped bronze axes, plastic bronze art as a decorative adjunct to ceremonial objects, artifacts of high prestige, and similar weapon forms; cattle and hornbills as favorite decorative motifs with ceremonial implications; and certain other distinctive decorative motifs, such as connected concentric circles, whorls, moth-antenna designs and S-shaped patterns. In terms of society and economy, he concluded, there is no question that Dong Son had a highly sophisticated and stratified society and intensive industrial specialization. On the other hand, it seems to have had no writing, and the dwelling sites so far identified show no evidence of mature urbanization (Chang 1977:466–467).

Chang was also one of the first to recognize that the western division of the Sichuan civilization shares with the contemporary civilization of Yunnan and Dong Son many decorative motifs and implement types, as well as the kettledrum (1977: 442–453). It is not clear that the east-west subdivision of the Sichuan (Shu) civilization was clearly demarcated. Sichuan as a whole shared many stylistic characteristics with both Ch'u (middle Yangtze) and Tien (Yunnan). Chang concluded that the civilization must have had a complex political organization and a sophisticated social stratification approaching the levels of a state structure. Historical records say Sichuan came under the control of the Ch'in state in 329 B.C. It may also be recalled that An Duong Vuong, the founder of the Au Lac state and builder of the Co Loa citadel in the third century B.C., hailed from this region, according to traditional Vietnamese historiography.

The period 1960–1970 saw extensive excavations and reporting by Vietnamese archaeologists (Davidson 1975, 1979; Nguyen Phuc Long 1975; Ha 1980; Hoang and Bui 1980; Solheim 1980), as well as the systematic application and publication of radiocarbon dates for many Vietnamese sites (Kohl and Quitta 1978; Bayard 1984). In the wake of this explosion of information, Bayard wrote in a review article on the state of Southeast Asian archaeology (1980) that Dong Son and Tien, though appearing slightly later in time, appear to have been equally advanced and certainly engaged in considerable interchange of both goods and ideas. Rather than pale

reflections of north Chinese civilization, both societies would appear to be the equals—save perhaps for the lack of writing—of their Ch'u and Han contemporaries. The view presented is essentially similar to that from contemporary Thailand and Burma: a largely indigenous development of technology and society (Bayard 1980:98). Similarly, Kempers (1988:311–326) notes that the Yunnan drums, with the exception of some Heger 1-like metal drums, are fundamentally different from the various types of kettledrum that have been found in the rest of Southeast Asia. Yunnan may have been a late local center of metalwork where a highly individual explosion of a type of bronze-casting occurred.

Dewall (1984) took a broader view of tribal contacts with the Han Chinese in southwestern China in the first millennium B.C. She recognized differences in social involvement in three categories of finds—import articles of Chinese provenance, iron-worked implements, and kettledrums from burial contexts—over a wide range of southwestern China, including Yunnan, Sichuan, and western Guizhou and Guangxi. The occurrence of Han import goods in tribal contexts entails an event of “implantation and of acceptance” as a consequence of encounter and contact (188–189). By contrast, ironworking stands for insider achievement, antecedent to Han contact, and conveys acceptance and approval of innovation and improvement in craftsmanship against the pre-existent background of bronze-using technology. The kettledrum and its equivalents as works of art, objects of ritual, and carriers of symbolic meaning have “distinctive qualities of social support attached to contrastive classes of object types,” such as tools, weapons, and ornaments, which make up the bulk of tribal late Bronze Age inventories in the inland region (188–189).

The specific ways of incorporating these three categories of finds into the tribal social, political, and economic fabric of the first millennium B.C. may differ noticeably from unit to unit. But one may argue for a remarkably sustained self-reliance within tribal society—a cultural interdependence. Challenges from without (political imbalances on both sides) and developments from within (reorientation away from vertically structured local clans and settlement groups) seem to have blocked these prestate societies from subsequent political self-realization in contiguity and on a par with the early Southeast Asian states.

The contacts between Yunnan, southeast China, and northern Viet Nam in the Shizhai Shan period make us think that there existed at the end of the first millennium B.C. a sort of cultural confederation comprising at least three centers: Yueh (southeast China), Dong Son (northern Viet Nam), and Shizhai Shan (Yunnan). Each of these centers presents its own characteristics and local coloring, visible even in manifestations common to the three groups (Pirazzoli-T'Serstevens 1979:126–127). The unity of the material culture from Dong Son and Tien has been the focus of this paper. The common cultural origins of Phung Nguyen–Dong Son and Sham Wan–Yueh Coastal Geometric of southeastern China has been cogently argued by Meacham (1977). Further, one finds evidence to suggest a material relationship between northern Viet Nam and modern Sichuan with the objects unearthed at Shizhai Shan as the possible corridor to northwest links there and potentially beyond (Chang 1977:442–453).

To explain this phenomenon, O'Harrow (1988 pers. comm.) suggests for the entire region of Sichuan, Yunnan, southeast China, and northern Indochina a stable, stationary peasant class attached to the land, with an itinerant, mobile warrior/elite class. What we find created across a broad cultural belt, then, is a series of multi-

ethnic societies that share many cultural traits but exist at various points of socio-political complexity along a continuum that stretches from state to chiefdom to tribe.

### SUMMARY

Given the current archaeological record it seems realistic to conclude that Dong Son was the first-millennium B.C. fulcrum of this cultural confederation, based on its *in situ* continuous development from Neolithic to Bronze Age and radiocarbon date sequences. Van Lang society represents a widespread and increasing hierarchical pattern of social and political complexity and centralization, with evidence for industrial specialization, large-scale irrigation works, and at least one proto-urban center. In Yunnan the lack of habitation sites, or other than burial sites, remains problematic and argues for an advanced ranked or chiefdom society in the Lake Tien region in which the control and circulation of prestige goods between tribal leaders maintained the wealth and status differences we find in the tomb burials that served to preserve both intra-regional and inter-regional political alliances (Dewall 1984: 216–217).

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