

Reflecting on Implicit Criteria of Evaluation in Area Studies through *The Indus: Lost Civilizations*

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Andrew Robinson's *The Indus: Lost Civilizations* captures the distinctive features of the Indus Valley civilization. The ancient society achieved sophisticated urban infrastructure and cross-regional trade networks, yet it lacks visible traces of centralized rulership, decipherable written records, and long-term cultural continuity, which sets it apart from dominant civilizational models. Readers' subtle regret over these historical gaps stems from two ingrained evaluative frameworks. The paper re-examines some tacit judging criteria and challenges the tendency to assess alien civilizations through culturally specific benchmarks. It argues that Chinese area studies must confront endogenous cognitive inertia and suspend preset value judgments to interpret marginalized civilizations on their own empirical terms and strengthen methodological reflexivity.

Keywords: indus civilization, civilizational evaluation criteria, eurocentrism, self-centrism

Introduction

Andrew Robinson's *The Indus: Lost Civilizations* offers a comprehensive introduction to the Indus Valley civilization (Robinson, 2015). This Bronze Age urban society, flourishing between roughly 2600 and 1900 BCE, possessed uniform brick standards, the world's earliest urban drainage systems, and a maritime trade network reaching Mesopotamia. At the same time, it exhibits traits that sit uncomfortably with conventional civilizational narratives. No palaces, royal tombs, or war monuments that would attest to centralized rule have been found. The symbols on seals remain undeciphered, and its urban centers were abandoned around 1900 BCE and never rebuilt on a comparable scale.

Confronted with this archaeological record, many observers respond not with pure astonishment but with a sense of regret. This regret is not merely personal. It presupposes that certain features are intrinsic to the ideal form of civilization. The standards that shape how readers perceive the Indus civilization are informed by at least two cognitive traditions, the Western-centric imperial narrative and the Chinese observer's own experience of Chinese civilization. Zou Guangwen points out that from the Age of Discovery through the early twentieth century, the West progressively established its own political institutions and economic models as the sole templates for civilization, generating a "cognitive framework characterized by hierarchy and exclusion that suppresses the diversity of human civilizations" (Zou, 2026). Within this framework, advanced

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civilization is expected to display centralized political authority, monumental architecture, and written records, precisely the features the Indus civilization lacks. This expectation has deep roots in Orientalist scholarship, which, as Edward Said demonstrated, constructed non-Western societies as inferior or incomplete according to Western standards (Said, 1978).

For the Chinese observer, the own experience of Chinese civilization, the unbroken continuity of Chinese civilization, the political tradition of unification since the Qin dynasty, and the textual historiographical tradition epitomized by *The Twenty-Four Histories*, have quietly shaped a latent standard that valorizes longevity unification and possession of textual records as markers of civilizational worth. Liang and Yang note that the problematic of Chinese area studies originates from a historical context markedly different from that of British area studies, which was rooted in colonial rule, or American area studies, rooted in the Cold War (Liang & Yang, 2025). However, the distinctiveness of one's problematic does not automatically guarantee methodological self-awareness. When Chinese researchers apply the qualities most prized by their own civilization as an implicit yardstick for measuring other civilizations, they risk reproducing the same cognitive habit of universalizing particular experience.

Zhao and Jiang have criticized Western area studies for “treating the object as a case for verifying the subject’s theoretical hypotheses” (Zhao & Jiang, 2024). This critique warrants serious consideration by Chinese researchers as well. When an observer brings to the Indus civilization presuppositions drawn from Chinese civilizational experience, continuity, unification, textual historiography, what emerges is not the Indus on its own terms, but the negative image of those presuppositions.

Drawing on Robinson’s account, this paper examines three implicit evaluative criteria, centralized order, writing, and duration, and concludes with a reflection on the methodological implications for area studies.

Measuring Order by Centralized Power

The Three Dimensions of Decentralization in the Indus Civilization

In the study of the Indus civilization, “decentralization” frequently appears on three levels. At the level of settlement patterns, the five major cities were roughly comparable in scale, with no evidence that any one exercised political jurisdiction over the others. At the level of social structure, Green (2021) notes that “after nearly a century of investigation, no clear evidence of a ruling elite has been found,” and asserts that “a ruling class is not a prerequisite for social complexity” (Green, 2021). The present paper employs “decentralization” primarily in the first and second senses, without equating it with wholesale egalitarianism.

Robinson repeatedly notes a fact that puzzled early excavators at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa: the absence of palaces, royal tombs, and war monuments. For nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western archaeologists, these absences were not neutral information but anomalies demanding explanation. Their interpretive framework derived from a specific tradition of understanding civilization: from Egyptian pyramids to Mesopotamian palace complexes, early civilizations were expected to display centralized politics and monumental architecture. Within this framework, the failure to find traces of centralized power signified scholarly frustration, either the evidence had not yet been found, or the civilization was somehow immature. This expectation, as Possehl has argued, reflects a deeply embedded assumption that early complex societies must have been organized around kingship and centralized authority (Possehl, 2002).

Material Evidence and the Comparative Case of Erlitou

Robinson provides material evidence that complicates this picture. Standardized brick proportions across the entire Indus region were extremely rare for their time, yet bricks from different sites exhibit discernible differences in raw material ratios and firing techniques, suggesting that production decisions were distributed among different craft communities (Kenoyer, 1998). The specific functions of the seals, whether identity markers, goods labels, or contractual credentials, remain contested. A cautious formulation would be that the Indus civilization exhibited a complex economic system that did not operate on any known model of centralized control, though its specific organizational mechanisms require further investigation.

A comparative study of Harappa and Erlitou by Wang et al. offers a useful reference (Wang & Wang, 2021). The term “open economy” here refers primarily to archaeologically observable cross-regional material circulation. In contrast, the contemporaneous Erlitou site exhibits steeper settlement hierarchies and craft production concentrated in core areas, leading scholars to interpret it as a more centralized polity. Two roughly contemporaneous early civilizations thus followed markedly different trajectories with respect to political centralization. This difference challenges the thesis of the inevitability of centralized power. The Indus civilization and Erlitou represent different organizational solutions, not a hierarchy of better and worse.

Measuring Civilization by Writing

The Undeciphered Script and the Chinese Textual Tradition

Robinson devotes a full chapter to the difficulties of deciphering the Indus script. The symbols carved on steatite seals average fewer than five characters per inscription. In the Chinese historiographical tradition, writing has long held a privileged position. From the oracle bone inscriptions to *The Twenty-Four Histories*, written texts served not merely as records but as central mechanisms of cultural transmission and political legitimacy. To readers steeped in this tradition, a civilization without transmitted texts appears silent and regrettable. This differs from early Western explorers, who under an imperial narrative saw the absence of writing as barbarism. The Chinese response is closer to cultural melancholy, and an advanced civilization could not tell its own story.

Robinson outlines two scholarly positions. One holds that the Indus symbols constitute undeciphered writing. The other, represented by Farmer et al., questions whether the symbols record linguistic sound or constitute writing in the usual sense (Farmer, Sproat, & Witzel, 2004). Vidale critiques the latter position (Vidale, 2007), and Rao et al. have advanced computational arguments that the symbol sequences exhibit conditional entropy patterns consistent with linguistic encoding (Rao, Yadav, Vahia, Joglekar, Adhikari, & Mahadevan, 2010). If the symbols are writing, their undecipherability is a technical contingency. They cannot be read now, but they once encoded language. If the latter view is correct, the absence of writing is a structural feature of the society. Whether a civilization possesses writing may not measure its completeness. If the Indus symbols are indeed writing, their undeciphered state reminds us that permanent loss of historical information is the norm. Most human civilizations lack decipherable texts, and China’s continuous textual lineage is exceptional rather than typical.

Text-Centrism and Its Pitfalls

Robinson's material-remains approach has limitations. The Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro can be described as a public bathing facility, but its specific function, religious, hygienic, or social, remains unknown, as does its possible relation to later Hindu ritual bathing. Material remains reveal technology and public works, but not symbolic worlds.

The point is not that material evidence is more authentic than texts. When texts are absent, understanding demands not only alternative evidence but also a critical awareness of one's own bias toward written sources. Studying a non-literate civilization through material remains does not decipher everything. Some information is irrecoverably lost. Area studies requires the humility to acknowledge this and to proceed with appropriate caution.

Measuring Value by Duration

The Longevity Equals Value Assumption

The urban phase of the Indus civilization lasted roughly seven hundred years. Compared with the unbroken five-thousand-year lineage often attributed to Chinese civilization, it appears brilliant yet brief. The psychological structure of this regret requires closer analysis. Is the observer regretting the length of seven hundred years as such, or the fact that such an advanced civilization failed to endure? These two emotional registers differ, yet they share a deeper presupposition: that the value of a civilization should be accompanied by duration.

Cultural Continuity as a Compensatory Strategy

Purification rituals are prominent in Indus sites and equally important in later Hinduism, but whether this constitutes transmission or independent convergence remains archaeologically undetermined. Parpola has argued for certain continuities between Indus religious symbolism and later South Asian traditions, but the evidence remains inferential (Parpola, 2015). To label these as continuity of cultural genes is a narrative strategy that compensates for political brevity with cultural longevity. This strategy itself remains beholden to longevity as an evaluative criterion. It merely shifts the scale of assessment from political entities to cultural elements.

Value as Self-Sufficient Civilizational Fact

The position taken here is not to prove that the Indus civilization was actually long-lived, but to question directly the presupposition that longevity equals value. Whether a civilization possesses independent worth should be determined not by the length of its existence, but by whether it developed an internally coherent social organization and created meaningful technologies and institutions during its duration.

The Indus civilization's urban planning, hydraulic engineering, metrological systems, and trade networks, even after the dissolution of its political entity, influenced later eras through technological diffusion and institutional borrowing. This is not a substitute for the longevity argument. It is a positive argument that value need not be measured by longevity. Even if no cultural elements of the Indus civilization were transmitted to later South Asian civilizations, and even if it disappeared entirely from human memory after 1900 BCE, the

seven hundred years of its existence would still constitute a self-sufficient civilizational fact. Its value is not diminished by its brevity, nor enhanced by the possibility that it might have continued.

Methodological Reflexivity

Beyond Eurocentrism and Chinese Cognitive Inertia

The preceding sections have traced implicit evaluative criteria. Their common structure is that observers project their own prized qualities, centralized order, textual permanence, and longevity, as universal measures. When a civilization deviates from these measures, observers tend to blame the object rather than the measure. The Indus case renders these parameters visible.

Chinese area studies has long resisted Eurocentrism, epitomized by the kingship-temple-military yardstick. High regard for writing may make a silent civilization an object of regret rather than understanding. Reverence for continuity and unification may inflate the cost of disruption and deflate the autonomy of decentralized forms. Wallerstein has shown how Eurocentric assumptions became embedded in the social sciences (Wallerstein, 1997), Chinese area studies must be equally vigilant against its own civilizational assumptions.

Because Chinese researchers lack both a colonial legacy in South Asia and direct self-projection onto the Indus, this experiential distance may help them suspend certain presuppositions. Yet it also risks filling gaps with familiar categories. Projecting Chinese notions such as *li zhi* (rule by ritual) or *de zhi* (rule by virtue) onto Indus society obscures its actual order, which appears built on craft consensus and material symbols. Greater distance demands sharper vigilance against projection.

Suspending Evaluation

Whether a civilization is judged complete by standards drawn from any particular civilizational experience is a judgment imposed by the observer, not a measure inherent to the object itself. Strictly speaking, one cannot and need not prove that the Indus civilization was complete.

The task of research is not to judge which civilization is more complete. It is to present the organizational principles of each civilization and examine where the observer's own criteria come from. The goal of suspending evaluative presuppositions may never be fully attainable. Researchers cannot understand the other in a vacuum. What they can do is identify the sources of their own presuppositions each time they make a judgment and remain aware of them. This kind of reflexivity is methodologically necessary for area studies. Studying other societies also makes the researcher's own cognitive presuppositions visible.

Conclusion

The title of Robinson's book, *The Indus: Lost Civilizations*, is suggestive. Long before the great gods later worshipped by millions appeared in South Asia, a people had already lived and built cities along the Indus. The archaeological record contains no divine names, epics, or commemorations of war. It does, however, preserve an early urban drainage system, also the evidence of maritime trade across the Arabian Sea, that persist in later South Asian traditions. The Indus case therefore demonstrates that sustained urban complexity did not require a conquest-based political order.

For the observers in the area studies, the Indus civilization offers an important methodological reminder. It is likely for them to scrutinize the implicit criteria of evaluation shaped by their own civilizational experience.

When confronting a civilization that is silent, brief, or otherwise resistant to established cognitive frameworks, the precondition for understanding it is to suspend all presuppositions about what is good and allow it to present itself on its own terms.

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