

Chapter 3

Food, Craft Production, and Social Inequality **Cross-Cultural Perspectives**

The social stage for this study, as discussed in the previous chapter, begins with a scene of agricultural villages scattered across the landscape of northern China, c. 4000 B.C. Yangshao settlements are situated in the central Yellow River valley, while Dawenkou settlements are concentrated in western Shandong. There are minimal differences among households with respect to social ranking on the basis of wealth and status. There are craft specialists in many villages, providing families with ceramic vessels for daily use as needed. Social identity is formed on the basis of both the household and the descent group.

By a few hundred years later, it is evident that changes in regional social organization have taken place, most likely a response to increasing populations and greater stress on subsistence resources such as land. In a few areas of the central and lower Yellow River valley, regional centers have emerged. Groups of villages evidently have become integrated with regional centers. By the late Yangshao and Dawenkou periods, c. 3000 B.C., a greater variety of craft goods are produced. Some Dawenkou period households choose to bury large quantities of pottery vessels with a minority of deceased individuals. It appears that there are greater differences among households with respect to economic resources. It is not clear, however, how and why an increase in social inequality occurred.

Sometime after 2600 B.C., during the Longshan period, the trends of increasing nucleation of population and production of labor-intensive craft goods become more pronounced. There are a larger number of regional

centers in several areas of the central and lower Yellow River valley, many of which are surrounded by earthen walls. There is no information on the nature of interactions between communities in different levels of a given settlement hierarchy. In more than one area there continues to be considerable differentiation among burials with respect to quality and quantity of craft goods. The organization of labor to produce pottery vessels and other craft goods is unclear, although it is likely that craft specialists worked in several communities. It appears that the period represents an increase in degree of social inequality, but the mechanisms by which this important change took place are not known.

The early Bronze Age is characterized by state-level societies with social stratification. Bronze food vessels are the prestige good of choice for elite burials. By the late Shang period, after c. 1200 B.C., Shang kings depend on these vessels to prepare sacrificial offerings to their royal ancestors. The ancestors are regarded as a vital source of power for the living, and bronze food vessels are the key component of the Shang political economy. The Shang authorities control production, distribution, and consumption of these vessels. It is not clear how change in the production and use of prestigious food vessels is linked to the development of social stratification.

The task ahead is to develop a method for explaining how and why such changes in the production and use of food vessels took place. A key issue that needs to be explained is how patterns of consumption, distribution, and production of food vessels changed over time in relation to increases in degree of social inequality. Another important issue is how the organization of labor for the production of both prestige wares and utilitarian vessels may have changed from the late Neolithic period to the early Bronze Age.

The cross-cultural ethnographic literature has abundant information about ways in which people in ranked societies, analogous to those that existed in northern China during the late Neolithic period, could have used prestigious foods and containers to negotiate both communal and hierarchical social relations. In particular it illustrates how food and food containers can be used as tools in social competition. A common method is giving gifts of food to others, in the form of feasts. Analysis of the literature provides a means for suggesting different possible pathways by which the degree of social inequality in northern China could have increased over time. It also illustrates how competitive feasting can cause changes in the production of food containers.

In addition, recent studies identify different kinds of behavior associated with feasting (Dietler 1990, 1996, 2001; Friedman and Rowlands 1977; Hayden 1995, 1996, 2001). These studies appropriately identify different goals and functions of feasts, with the recognition that more than one kind

of feast can exist in a given society. Only recently have scholars considered that there may be greater variation in the degree to which unequal social relations may be negotiated with food and containers. Potter (2000) points out that the scale of social participation and finance in competitive feasting may vary, involving a few households or a number of households, from the same settlement, or from outside areas. Similarly, Hayden (1995, 1996) and Kirch (2001) consider how feasting may vary in relation to social scale and degree of social inequality. At one end of the continuum, food is a major form of wealth, accessible to a wide range of households (Hayden 1995, 1996). There can be mild competition ("empowering feasts," Dietler 2001:76), or intense competition with food (Hayden 1995, 1996, 2001). Feasting also may be the social setting for exchange of craft goods (Dietler 2001; Friedman and Rowlands 1977; Hayden 2001). Therefore an increase in feasting also could instigate associated changes in production of non-food-related craft goods.

The review of ethnographic societies in this chapter is intended to explore variation in behavior with food and craft goods (food containers, other goods) in relation to degree of social inequality. Three basic social processes expressed with food can be identified: group integration, status competition, and display of elite power. Food can be used as a wealth item, and it is a versatile form of wealth. The ethnographic cases show how food can be accumulated and invested in various ways, including hosting feasts, which may involve sponsoring specialists to acquire craft goods. A gift of food is a good social investment, because it establishes relations of obligation with the recipients. Households give food in exchange for labor or resources such as craft goods and foodstuffs. Competitive feasting can develop when some households seek to acquire a larger pool of labor or resources than others, and the nature of the relationship between host and recipient changes from reciprocity to dependency. The model proposes that an increase in competitive feasting can cause intensification in food and craft production, and more restricted access to food surpluses. My review includes mortuary feasts, a particularly relevant theme for China that is discussed further in Chapter 4.

I use the cross-cultural ethnographic cases to propose different pathways by which unequal relations of economic power between households may develop (Figure 3.1). Feasts may be widespread and integrative, weakly competitive, highly competitive, or exclusive. Households may attempt to increase their economic power by accumulating food and hosting feasts on an increasingly larger scale. Increased economic competition can cause change in degree of access to food wealth, from widespread to restricted, and change in access to craft goods used in feasts. For highly competitive and exclusive feasts, households rely on a relatively large pool of labor that may involve people in other settlements, including non-kin.

Increase in Degree of Social and Economic Inequality in Ranked Societies: Food and Containers

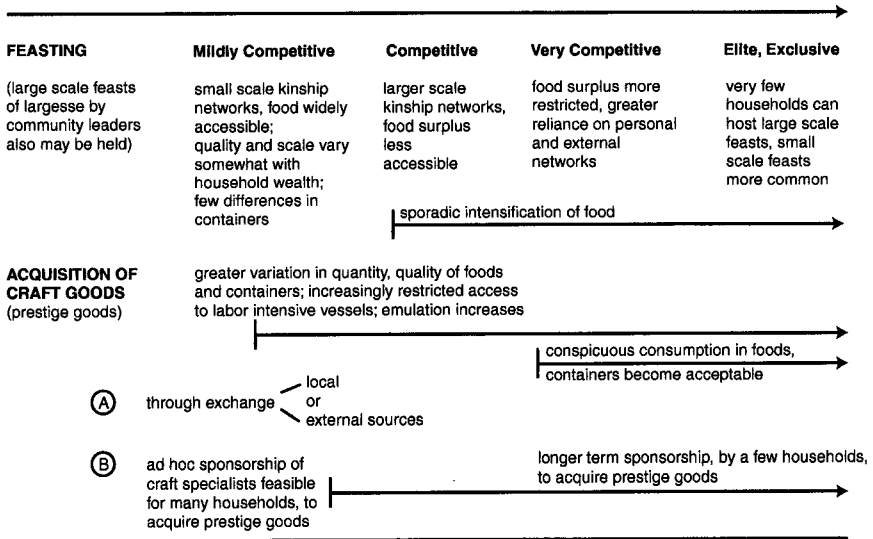


Figure 3.1. Food, craft production, and social inequality.

INTEGRATIVE AND HIERARCHICAL RELATIONS THROUGH EXCHANGE OF FOOD

Feasting is a common component of life-crisis ceremonies such as marriages and funerals. Some kinds of foods, such as pigs and alcoholic beverages, tend to be valued at any kind of feast because of the relatively large amount of human labor they represent (Hayden 1996). When food is a widely accessible form of wealth, special occasions for public consumption activities (as opposed to daily, domestic meal consumption) celebrate the unity of the group, whether small or large. The goal of these integrative, public events is for pleasure and to display family pride in a noncompetitive manner, as observed during life-crisis ceremonies in rural Peru (Tschoepik 1950), the Philippines (Longacre 1985; Solheim 1965), and central India (Miller 1985:73–74). Aid from kinsmen in hosting a feast is repaid at a later time as a reciprocal exchange. A wide range of households can amass resources to hold feasts when degree of socioeconomic inequality is low. Special feasting dishes may be used, but differences between households are not great. A common material correlate for feasts, whether integrative or competitive, is large vessels. In Peru, many households use large decorated basins for serving food, large quantities of vessels, and a diversity of forms (Tschoepik 1950:206, 215–216). Similarly, in the Philippines many

households use large cooking pots and elaborate porcelain serving dishes and jars for rice wine (Longacre 1985:344; Solheim 1965:256–258, 281).

In other areas where food is a widely accessible, major form of wealth, gifts of food through feasting and other events can be mildly competitive (Hayden 1995, 1996). Again, many households have the ability to acquire surplus food and containers for feasts through reciprocal kinship relations. Age and gender, however, often are parameters influencing the success of an individual to amass a surplus of food resources and earn prestige. Among the Mambila of Nigeria, all men exchange pots of beer, a highly valued food, with partners. Older men have higher status and a greater ability to give and receive pots of beer than younger men. Through a lifetime of establishing cooperative relations with a range of kin, they can amass sufficient labor to acquire the largest quantities of beer pots. Men also engage in competitive exchanges of meat, especially chickens (Rehfishch 1987).

Similarly, among the Bemba of Rhodesia, food is a wealth item valued by every household (Richards 1939). All households aspire to acquire enough food to give others in feasts, an activity that requires cooperative labor and resources from kinsmen. The extensive cooperative relations among kin managed by elders allow acquisition of beer and meat (cattle), the two most highly valued foods. The fermented beverages made from grains are regarded as a food, and they contain important nutrients. Beer is the most labor-intensive food to prepare, requiring much planning (Richards 1939:97–109). These gifts require eventual repayment from recipients, usually kinsmen, which may take the form of labor. Alcoholic beverages are an important kind of wealth item that play an important role in establishing social relations in other African societies, such as the Ghonja of Ghana (Goody 1982:72). The Thonga of southern Africa give large quantities of beer to others in competitive feasts, and large drinking calabashes bring greater prestige to the consumer (Washburne 1961).

A wide range of Bemba households use gift exchange of food to influence their control over the labor of others and to enhance their own prestige (Richards 1939). This type of system goes beyond simple reciprocal exchanges between kinsmen. Households choose how much to give to others, even to kinsmen. Elders have a more extensive network of kin to draw from than younger people. Likewise, Firth (1965:343) notes that for Tikopia, another weakly centralized chiefdom, all households use food to initiate or end economic or social transactions. Archaeologically one should expect that differences between households in terms of access to a food surplus, or quality and quantity of food containers, would not be great except for the households of older males.

In Bemba society, chiefs host feasts of a qualitatively different kind. Only the chiefly household has the ability to amass large quantities of food,



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