

Chapter 1

Craft Production and the Development of Complex Societies in Ancient China

A longstanding question in anthropology has been why humans produce more than they need (Sahlins 1972). This basic, yet deceptively simple, question has been difficult to answer. It has been observed that in many areas of the world, production of surplus food and craft goods enables people to create and maintain a variety of social relationships. Also, people desire and value labor-intensive craft goods that bring prestige to the user or owner. There are, however, significant differences among areas that can only be explained by considering beliefs about the value of goods.

Studies by anthropological archaeologists tend to investigate only one of these processes without respect to the other – the production and management of a food surplus, or, independently, an excess of craft goods. They have focused primarily on explaining how the production and use of prestige goods changed in relation to the development of states. A commonly held assumption has been that one causal factor in state formation was an increasing ability by elites to control production, distribution, and consumption of prestige goods. Other, more recent studies have assessed how people manage a food surplus through feasting, but most have not considered the relationship between change in the management of a food surplus and the rise of complex societies.

This study intends to show that both kinds of processes are important for understanding the development of complex societies in ancient China. A striking characteristic of the late prehistoric and early historic periods in northern China is the predominance of labor-intensive food vessels as prestige goods. Changes in patterns of production and consumption of these craft goods provide a window for understanding how and why social stratification

developed, by revealing how people attempted to control food surpluses, prestigious foods, and access to prestigious food vessels.

The study examines how the desire for excess goods can cause more than one kind of social change. Pursuit of excess can motivate competition over access to different kinds of goods and motivate new methods to display status. Change in social demand for goods can propel crafts people to alter production techniques, shapes, and styles. These factors can, in turn, lead to change in the organization of labor for production of goods. Such changes are potentially relevant for any area of the world where early states developed. The relationship between change in craft production and the development of states, however, is not straightforward, with predictable and coinciding trajectories. Different kinds of social change, such as the development of social stratification, the rise of political centralization, and increase in division of labor, may occur at substantially different rates, rather than at the same rate as often assumed.

This study focuses on ranked societies in the Yellow River valley of northern China during two eras of the late Neolithic period, the Dawenkou/late Yangshao periods (c. 4100–2600 B.C.) and the Longshan period (c. 2600–1900 B.C.), and the era of the earliest undisputed states with bronze metallurgy, the Erlitou (c. 1900–1500 B.C.) and Shang (c. 1600–1046 B.C.) periods. There is unquestionable evidence for large-scale production of bronze food vessels and other prestige goods from elite contexts at Shang period capitals like Anyang and Zhengzhou (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Chang 1983a; Figure 1), and these bronze food vessels were central to the political economy.

Explanations for changes in the production and use of goods must consider the nature of social demand, or the meaning of goods in a given historical context. They need to include how people use different kinds of goods to negotiate social relationships. This study explains how ceramic and bronze vessels, especially those for the presentation and consumption of food in ritualized contexts, were valued goods for displaying and negotiating power relations during the late Neolithic period and early Bronze Age. The containers displayed status, wealth, and honor for individual households, as well as descent groups that managed economic resources such as land. While small quantities of labor-intensive vessels have been recovered from residential areas, most of our information comes from grave contexts. Mourners placed large quantities of vessels for food and drink in burials as offerings. They made a singular effort to include a variety of labor-intensive vessels. During the late Neolithic period, mourners placed thin-walled, polished pottery vessels of elaborate shapes into graves. Later, during the early Bronze Age, cast bronze vessels were the preferred

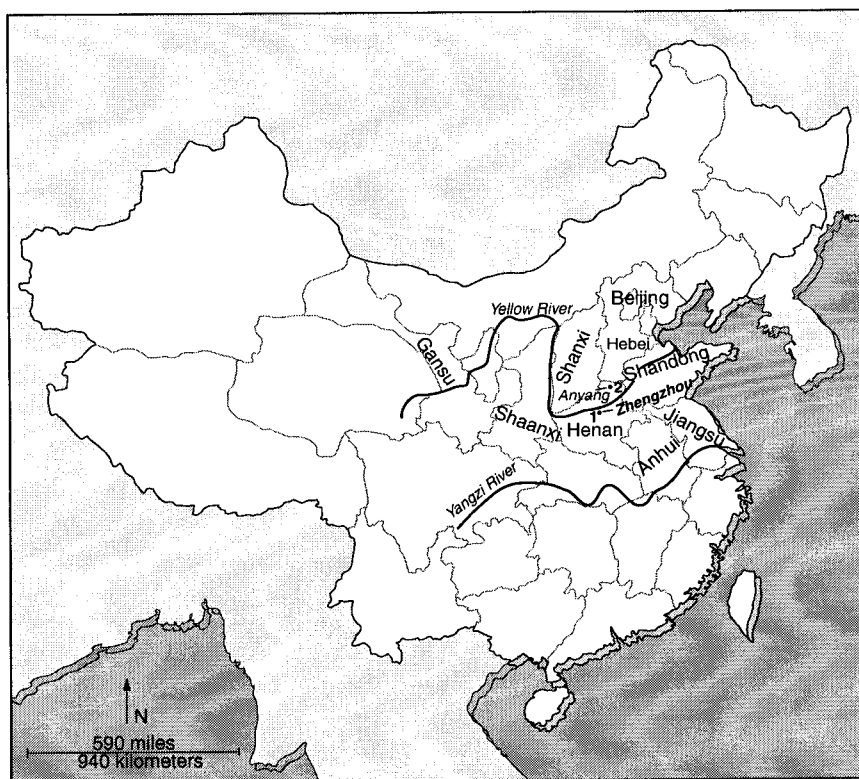


Figure 1.1. The Yellow River valley of northern China.

offerings. Essentially, for roughly three thousand years, food containers were the most abundant type of offering in graves.

It is argued here that changes in the production and use of food vessels in ancient China were motivated by the desire to negotiate social relationships with both the living and the dead. Explaining this behavior requires considering not just the meaning of pottery and bronze containers in social and ritual life, but also the role of food. Given the central role of bronze food vessels in the Shang political economy, it is often assumed that an important factor in the development of complex societies in northern China was increasing control by elites over the production, distribution, and consumption of prestige goods. This study, however, concludes that control over the production and use of these prestigious food vessels was not a causal factor in the development of political centralization. Fundamental elements of social stratification in China that emerged were

rights over food surpluses, labor for growing and preparing food, and rights of access to prestigious foods and food containers.

PRESTIGE GOODS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Significant archaeological research on change in systems of craft production as complex societies develop has been conducted for several areas of the world, with the exception of China (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Clark and Parry 1990; Costin 1991, 2001; Stein 1998, 2001; Wailes 1996). The most common expectation is that there was a fundamental change in the organization of labor to produce craft goods as chiefdoms evolved into states, i.e., that there was a change from part-time to full-time specialization (Flannery 1972; Rice 1981; Wright 1978). Craft specialization refers to production for consumers beyond the household (Clark 1995; Clark and Parry 1990; Costin 1991; Rice 1987). It may be defined as a process by which people regularly provide one commodity or service in exchange for another (Costin 1991:3). It is important to note that craft specialization is not associated only with complex societies; it is found in nonstratified as well as stratified societies (Clark and Parry 1990; Cobb 1993; Cross 1993).

A focus of many studies is change in production, distribution, and consumption of prestige goods. Prestige goods symbolize status and privilege, and they are unevenly distributed within ranked societies (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Hirth 1996; Blanton et al. 1996). Cross-cultural archaeological and ethnographic data indicate that these highly valued goods may be finely made containers, personal ornaments or clothing, weapons, or certain kinds of food and drink. A common denominator is relatively high cost in terms of acquiring raw materials and/or the process of production. Especially valued are objects acquired from foreign areas (rare raw materials or finished products) and objects exhibiting great amounts of labor expenditure (Clark and Parry 1990; Earle 1982, 1991, 1997; Hayden 1998:11; Peregrine 1991). Some of these are "hypertrophic" goods (Clark and Parry 1990), elaborated to the point that normal use is not possible, due to fragility or large size.

A goal of many studies is to assess how elites attempt to control access to such highly valued and relatively rare, prestige goods (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; D'Altroy and Earle 1985; Earle 1997, 2000; Hirth 1996; Smith 1991; Spencer 1990). Elites seek to gain economic, social, ideological, and/or military power (Mann 1986). Some degree of control over the economy is necessary for elites to establish and increase their political power.

Control over production, distribution, and consumption of different kinds of goods enables elites to accumulate a surplus and make investments that enable them to attract, maintain, and increase followers. Elites may use prestige goods to publicly display status, or they may present these goods as gifts, in a system of wealth finance, to supporters in exchange for services (Brumfiel and Earle 1987:3–4; D'Altroy and Earle 1985; Earle 1991, Earle 1997; Hirth 1996:214; Peregrine 1991). Elites often seek to import and accumulate a steady supply of foreign prestige goods or raw materials. Foreign goods may symbolize (through material, form, or iconography) the ability to acquire costly objects, extensive external connections with foreign peoples (including access to new elite ideologies), or the sacredness of elites (Earle 1997:149–150; Frankenstein and Rowlands 1978; Friedman and Rowlands 1978; Helms 1993; Hirth 1996:214, 218–219). It also is recognized, however, that different leadership strategies may develop for investing wealth and displaying power. At one end of the continuum is corporate, or shared power, while network, or individual personal power, is at the other (Blanton et al. 1996; Feinman 1995).

One avenue by which an individual or group can increase political power is by controlling the production of prestige goods. After Goldman (1970:495) proposed that status competition causes significant changes in craft specialization, a number of other scholars have proposed that there should also be a change in organization of labor to produce prestige goods as complex societies develop. Elites can gain control over production of prestige goods most effectively by permanent sponsorship of craft specialists, or “attached specialization” (Costin 1991; Costin and Hagstrum 1995; Earle 1981, 1997). Access to highly valued goods is ensured by controlling the skilled laborers necessary for production (Brumfiel and Earle 1987:4–5). Relatively complete control over the production of prestige goods may be achieved by establishing workshops within or near spatial areas managed by elites, such as households, palaces, or temples (Clark and Parry 1990; Costin 1991; Hirth 1996:213–214). Control is easier to achieve when a complicated technology is employed (Earle 1997:191). Since attached specialization of labor-intensive goods is associated with stratified societies (Clark and Parry 1990), it has been implicitly assumed that the development of attached specialization occurs in conjunction with the development of political centralization. Attached specialization is contrasted with independent specialization, in which crafts people have the power to make their own economic decisions.

Of the three strategies that elites may employ, control over production of prestige goods seems to be more effective than control over distribution or consumption. Despite the importance of prestige goods, wealth finance or acquisition of imported goods in general may not be a stable source of



<http://www.springer.com/978-0-306-46771-4>

Craft Production and Social Change in Northern China

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2002, XVI, 346 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-306-46771-4