

## *Chapter 2*

# ***Sources of Data on Social and Economic Change during the Late Neolithic Period and Early Bronze Age***

There are two primary sources of data for understanding the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age societies of northern China. The early Bronze Age, Shang dynastic period (c. 1600–1046 B.C., Qiu and Cai 2001), is the first period for which a writing system is known. Most of the written records are inscriptions carved on cattle bone and turtle shells, referred to as oracle bone inscriptions. Another important medium for writing is inscriptions on bronze vessels. No written records from the immediately preceding Xia dynasty (represented by the Erlitou culture, c. 1900–1500 B.C.) have been discovered. The other primary source of data for the early Bronze Age is settlement sites and burials. For the entire late Neolithic period, which lacks written records, researchers must rely exclusively on archaeological data. This study also employs later historical texts from China to make proposals about the nature of social and economic organization during the late Neolithic period and early Bronze Age.

In any area where archaeological fieldwork is conducted, the kinds of data that are collected and the nature of interpretations that are made are influenced by the theoretical approach of the researcher. While researchers from China and other countries share many approaches to fieldwork and analysis, there have been some important differences. Archaeology in China is primarily a historical discipline (Chang 1981; von Falkenhausen 1993, 1995; Olsen 1987, 1992; Wang 1997; Xia 1990). A major goal is to explain development of cultures in specific areas that led to specific peoples

mentioned in early historical texts. Furthermore, archaeology is a personal quest, since most scholars belong to the majority ethnic group of China, called the Han, which traces its roots to the earliest dynasties. Therefore, archaeological research in the Yellow River valley is viewed primarily from an internal perspective, with a focus on the development of Chinese civilization (Trigger 1984; Yan 1997a; Wang 1997). In contrast, North American archaeology is conducted primarily from a comparative perspective.

The historical orientation of archaeological research in China affects the nature of data described in publications, and thus the kinds of data available for studies of social change. A priority of archaeological research on the late Neolithic period has been to determine the emergence of specific traits of early Chinese civilization, such as bronze metallurgy, walled towns, social differentiation as expressed in mortuary treatment, and writing (Editorial Board 1992). Another common goal is to identify historical connections between sites in large areas on the basis of ceramic style. For example, sites from the final Neolithic, Longshan period (c. 2600–1900 B.C.) that have a common historical heritage are classified into the same specific “type” (*leixing*) (Chang 1999; Underhill 1994).

In order to understand the nature of data in Chinese archaeological publications, it also is important to note that most fieldwork has involved rescue excavations. Archaeologists usually do not have the luxury of conducting fieldwork to investigate particular research problems (Chang 1981:168; Olsen 1987:287, Olsen 1992:3–4). Given the staggering economic development occurring all over the country, pressures on time and resources are not likely to diminish soon.

During the past decade, theoretical and methodological approaches to archaeology in China have been rapidly diversifying. As a consequence, there are increasing similarities in approaches employed by archaeologists in other areas. There is growing interest in approaches employed in North America, Europe, Japan, and other areas. Translations of essays on topics such as processual archaeology (*guocheng kaoguxue*) and postprocessual archaeology (*hou guocheng kaoguxue*) (National Museum 1991) have appeared, as have thoughtful evaluations of the history of archaeological method and theory in China (Dong 1994; He 1999). Other publications introduce concepts such as middle-range theory, bridging arguments, models, and hypothesis testing (Cao 1993a). Another relevant development is the evaluation of approaches for investigating social relations at different scales of analysis, using burials (Han 1992) and pottery (Wang 1997). There is increasing interest in the prehistory of other world areas, with the translation of foreign archaeology books such as *People of the Earth* (Fagan 1986, Diqiu Shang de Renmen) (Yunnan Institute 1991), and interest in a comparative approach to the rise of civilization (Chen 1994; Yang 1999).

During the 1990s, when the national government first allowed Sino-foreign collaborative fieldwork, systematic regional surveys and excavations began in several areas of China (Henan Province Cultural Relics Institute and Missouri 1998; Jing et al. 1997; Murowshick 1997; Shelach 1998; Underhill et al. 1998, 2002). Such collaborative efforts have further facilitated the integration of methodological approaches among archaeologists from China and North America.

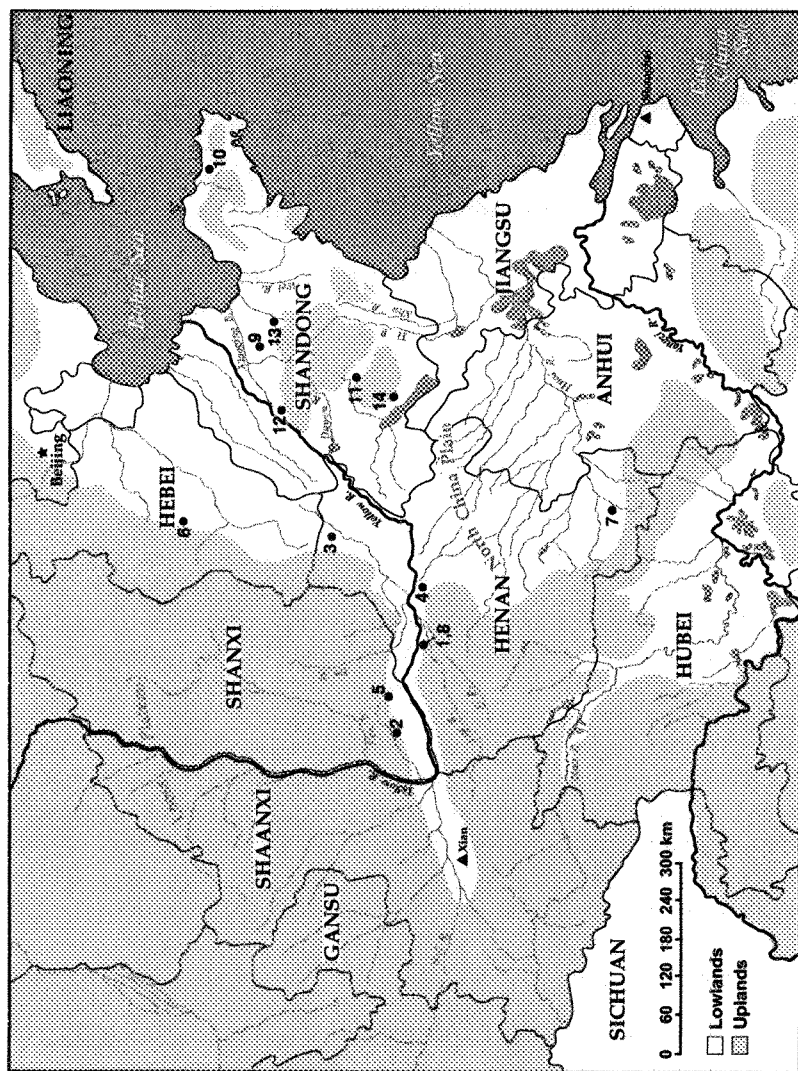
### **THE YELLOW RIVER VALLEY OF NORTHERN CHINA**

Comprehensive treatments of archaeology in China by Chang (1986, 1989), Murowchick (1994), and Barnes (1993) refer to cultural developments in the Yellow River valley as distinct from those in other major river valleys. Similarly, this book refers to the Yellow River valley of northern China as a discrete analytical unit for discussing social and economic change. Even though many important sites technically are located at a considerable distance from the Yellow River itself, there are significant cultural similarities from region to region within this large area.

The Yellow River valley clearly is not the only area in China where complex societies developed, contrary to earlier views (Chen 1997; von Falkenhausen 1994; Wang 1997; Yan 1987, 1999b; see also Nelson 1995; Shelach 1999). The Yellow River valley continues to be important, however, because it is where the earliest known states emerged. Furthermore, states emerged in more than one area of the valley (Chang 1983b, 1986, 1989).

There are numerous debates over the chronology of political developments in the Yellow River valley. The traditional view, subscribed to here, is that the Erlitou period represents the emergence of states. Most scholars maintain that Erlitou sites represent the Xia dynasty, a name first mentioned in later historical texts (Chang 1983a, 1983b, 1986; Thorp 1991; Yan 1997a). Erlitou sites are distributed in west-central Henan and southern Shanxi (Figure 2.1). A recent estimate is that the Xia dynasty spanned from c. 2070 to 1600 B.C. (Qiu and Cai 2001).

The Yellow River valley encompasses an enormous area, and there are distinct regional differences in physical terrain and climate (Liu 1988; Ren et al. 1985; Tuan 1970; Zhao 1986). Publications emphasize similarities in material culture across the middle and lower reaches of the river valley and tend to make generalizations about social change for the entire area. Comparisons that are made focus on specific peoples mentioned in historical texts. There has not been sufficient effort to determine whether the nature and rate of social change varied by region. There may have been



**Figure 2.1.** Early Bronze Age sites in the Yellow River valley. *Erliu period*: 1 = Erliu, 2 = Dongxiafeng. *Shang period*: 3 = Anyang (includes Lüjiazhuang, Guojiazhuang), 4 = Zhengzhou, 5 = Yuanqu, 6 = Taxai, 7 = Tianhu, 8 = Yanshi. *Yueshi period*: 9 = Shijia, 10 = Zhaogezhuang, 11 = Yinjiacheng. *Shang period*: 12 = Daxinzhuang, 13 = Sufutun, 14 = Qianzhangda.

important regional differences in economic organization, including agricultural and craft production. For this study, it is feasible to compare social and economic change in two broad geographic regions, defined as the central Yellow River valley (west, east) and the lower Yellow River valley (abbreviated as western Shandong, eastern Shandong; Table 2.1). More

**Table 2.1. Major Cultural Phases in the Yellow River Valley by Region, West to East**

Central Yellow River valley		Lower Yellow River valley	
Eastern Gansu, southern Shanxi, southern Shaanxi	Southern Hebei, Henan	Western Shandong, northwest Jiangsu, northern Anhui	Eastern Shandong, central/northeastern Jiangsu
Western Zhou, c. 1046–771 B.C.	Western Zhou, c. 1046–771 B.C.	Western Zhou, c. 1046–771 B.C.	Western Zhou, c. 1046–771 B.C.
Unclear	Late Shang, c. 1200–1046 B.C.	Late Shang, c. 1200–1046 B.C.	Late Shang, c. 1200–1046 B.C.
Unclear	Middle Shang, c. 1400–1200 B.C.	Middle Shang, c. 1400–1200 B.C.	Unclear
Unclear	Early Shang, c. 1570–1400 B.C.	Unclear	Unclear
Erlitou (Xia), c. 1900–1500 B.C.	Erlitou (Xia), c. 1900–1500 B.C.	Yueshi, c. 1900– 1600 B.C.	Yueshi, c. 1900– 1600 B.C.
Late Longshan, c. 2200–1900 B.C.	Late Longshan, c. 2200–1900 B.C.	Late Longshan, c. 2200–1900 B.C.	Late Longshan, c. 2200–1900 B.C.
Middle Longshan, c. 2500–2200 B.C.	Middle Longshan, c. 2500–2200 B.C.	Middle Longshan, c. 2400–2200 B.C.	Middle Longshan, c. 2400–2200 B.C.
Early Longshan, c. 2800–2500 B.C.	Early Longshan, c. 2800–2500 B.C.	Early Longshan, c. 2600–2400 B.C.	Early Longshan, possibly c. 2600– 2400 B.C. or later
Late Yangshao, c. 3500–2800 B.C.	Late Yangshao, c. 3500–2800 B.C.	Late Dawenkou, c. 3000–2600 B.C. Middle Dawenkou, c. 3500–3000 B.C.	Late Dawenkou, c. 3000–2600 B.C. Unclear
Middle Yangshao, c. 4000–3500 B.C.	Middle Yangshao, c. 4000–3500 B.C.	Early Dawenkou, c. 4100–3500 B.C.	Unclear
Early Yangshao, c. 5000–4000 B.C.	Early Yangshao, c. 5100–4000 B.C.	Beixin, – c. 5300–4100 B.C.	Beixin, – c. 5300–4100 B.C.
Laoguantai, c. 6000–5000 B.C.	Peiligang, c. 6300– 5100 B.C.	Houli, – c. 6500–5300 B.C.	Unclear



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