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978-0-521-64310-8 - Cambridge World Archaeology: The Archaeology of China: From the Late Paleolithic to the Early Bronze Age

Li Liu and Xingcan Chen

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF CHINA

This book explores the roles of agricultural development and advancing social complexity in the processes of state formation in China. Over a period of about 10,000 years, it follows evolutionary trajectories of society from the last Paleolithic hunting-gathering groups, through Neolithic farming villages, and on to the Bronze Age Shang dynasty in the latter half of the second millennium BC. Li Liu and Xingcan Chen demonstrate that sociopolitical evolution was multicentric and shaped by interpolity factionalism and competition, as well as by the many material technologies introduced from other parts of the world. The book illustrates how ancient Chinese societies were transformed during this period from simple to complex, tribal to urban, and preliterate to literate.

Li Liu is Sir Robert Ho Tung Professor in Chinese Archaeology in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Stanford University. She is the author of two books, *The Chinese Neolithic: Trajectories to Early States* and (with Xingcan Chen) *State Formation in Early China*, as well as more than seventy journal articles in both English and Chinese.

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF
CHINA

From the Late Paleolithic to the Early Bronze Age

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Dedicated to

Professor Kwang-chih Chang

*If we have been able to see further, it was only because we stood on the shoulders of
giants.*

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PREFACE

The development of early Chinese civilization occupies a unique position in world history, and new archaeological discoveries from China in recent decades have made Chinese archaeology a fascinating topic for both academic circles and the general public. Nevertheless, because of the linguistic, cultural, and social obstacles that have historically existed between China and the Western world, comprehensive studies of Chinese archaeology published in English for Western readers have been lacking.

The most widely used book on Chinese archaeology in English has so far been *The Archaeology of Ancient China* by the late Professor Kwang-chih Chang. It covers periods from the Paleolithic to early dynasties and was continuously revised during the course of twenty-three years, published in four editions in 1963, 1967, 1977, and 1986. It is a rich sourcebook for scholars and students interested in Chinese archaeology, but its last edition was published twenty-five years ago, and much of the information available then should be updated. As former students of K.-c. Chang, we are responsible for carrying on the mission to which he devoted much of his professional life.

Evidently, there has long been a great need for a book that would cover a longer period of early Chinese history and embrace broader topics commonly treated in the study of world archaeology. Such a book not only should provide basic and up-to-date information on Chinese archaeology, but it should also address some fundamental issues that concern the development of ancient civilization in China and are also relevant to the understanding of social evolution worldwide. This book, therefore, is intended to fulfill this need.

As the title of the book implies, the major theoretical topics covered in it are the roles of agricultural development and state formation in the processes of advancing social complexity within the area defined by modern China. It focuses on a period of about 10,000 years of ancient history, with a brief background of preceding cultural developments up to ca. 24,000 cal. BP. It involves evolutionary trajectories from the last Paleolithic hunting-gathering

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groups, through Neolithic farming villages, to the Bronze Age Shang dynasty. The book illustrates how ancient societies during this period were transformed from simple to complex, tribal to urban, “uncivilized” to “civilized,” and preliterate to literate.

In Chapter 1 we review the history of Chinese archaeology and provide a sociopolitical background for the development of this discipline since the early twentieth century. Chapter 2 introduces the natural environment of China and the relationship between ever-changing ecosystems and human responses and adaptations. Chapter 3 focuses on the transitional period from Pleistocene to Holocene, emphasizing the early Holocene when the last foragers began to intensively exploit plant foodstuffs under conditions of reduced mobility, a subsistence strategy that eventually led to sedentary agriculture. Unlike a recent trend in some archaeological literature that classifies this period as the early Neolithic in China, on the basis of the presence of pottery, we use the term “Epi-paleolithic” to describe those early Holocene sites lacking clear evidence of domestication. A Neolithic revolution, based on current data, appeared around 7000 BC. Chapter 4 is devoted to the origins of animal husbandry and plant domestication; whereas some species were domesticated locally, others were introduced from outside China. Nevertheless, they all became economically significant and contributed to the development of complex society. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 cover the early, middle, and late Neolithic periods, respectively, lasting about five thousand years (ca. 7000–2000 BC). During this period, social stratification emerged, early complex societies rose and fell, populations increased and declined, and fortified settlements were built and collapsed. This turbulent era nevertheless formed the foundation for the development of early states in China. Chapter 8 discusses formation of the first states, Erlitou and Erligang. Social transformations took place not only within the states’ core area in the Central Plain, but were also manifested through intensive interactions between the center and periphery, as the state rapidly expanded to the surrounding regions, to control key resources. In Chapter 9 we extend our scope to the Bronze Age cultures in the northern frontiers and beyond, which were contemporary with the Erlitou and Erligang states. This approach helps us to understand social and cultural changes that occurred over a broader region, and how these changes may have influenced the core area of early Chinese states. Chapter 10 is concerned with the late Shang dynasty, the first historical state. At this stage of the narrative, our study is facilitated by the increase in available types of materials to work with, including writing. Because the wealth of information from the late Shang period cannot be fully discussed in this chapter, we focus on the political landscape and regional interactions between Shang and its neighbors, as an overview of this extremely complex dynasty. We end this book, in Chapter 11, with a discussion on some particular characteristics of Chinese civilization, or Chineseness, without attempting to generalize.

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In this volume we frequently use the concept “archaeological culture,” such as Yangshao culture and Longshan culture. The term has been widely used in Chinese archaeological literature to describe material remains, a concept similar to complexities and horizons in archaeological literature in the West. It refers to a material assemblage with shared characteristics, found in archaeological contexts at multiple sites and distributed through a region. A culture is normally named after the location from which such a material assemblage was first identified (Xia, N. 1959). It is notable that, following Soviet practice introduced in the 1950s, an archaeological culture is often considered in China to correspond with a distinct ethnic entity (Xia, N. 2000). The term “culture” (as used in this book), however, is aligned with the conventional description of archaeological assemblages in time and space, and bears no implication as to the ethnic identity of the people who used these material items.

This book does not cover most of the Paleolithic period, because that subject deserves an independent volume and is beyond our present scope. We conclude the book with the late Shang period because there are already a number of publications devoted to archaeology of the Western Zhou and Eastern Zhou periods during the first millennium BC (Falkenhausen 2006; Hsu and Linduff 1988; Li, F. 2006, 2008; Shelach 2009a). Our primary objective is to present the developmental processes of prehistoric complex societies, which are best manifested by the evolutionary paths from first villages to first states.

To provide the most updated archaeological information, we draw primarily on findings reported in the Chinese literature. Because this book is written for English readers, we have also made efforts to use English sources as much as possible. As for carbon 14 dates, BP is used for uncalibrated dates before the “present” (i.e., 1950), cal. BP for calendar/calibrated dates before the “present” (1950), and BC for calibrated dates before the Common Era. We follow the custom in China for writing Chinese people’s names, placing the surname before the given name (e.g., Tong Enzheng), when using references published in Chinese, but use the Western order of names (e.g., Kwang-chih Chang) if the original publication is in English.

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