The Chinese Neolithic

This book studies the formation of complex societies in prehistoric China during the Neolithic and early state periods, c. 7000–1500 BC. Archaeological materials are interpreted through anthropological perspectives, using systematic analysis of settlement and burial patterns. Both agency and process are considered in the development of chiefdoms and in the emergence of early states in the Yellow River region. Interrelationships between factors such as mortuary practice, craft specialization, ritual activities, warfare, exchange of elite goods, climatic fluctuations, and environmental changes are emphasized. This study offers a critical evaluation of current archaeological data from Chinese sources, and argues that, although some general tendencies are noted, social changes were affected by multiple factors in no pre-determined sequence. In this most comprehensive study to date, Li Liu attempts to reconstruct developmental trajectories toward early states in Chinese civilization and discusses theoretical implications of Chinese archaeology for the understanding of social evolution.

LI LIU is Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at La Trobe University. She has published various articles on the Chinese Neolithic and is the author of State Formation in Early China (with Xingcan Chen) (2003).
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Dedicated to
my parents, my sisters, and Tom and Vicky
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Chinese archaeology is a fast-growing field of study, and new information is accumulating rapidly. Such a tremendous volume of data can provide insights for our understanding of social evolution in world history. However, because of the language barrier and methodological and theoretical differences between Chinese and Western archaeologists, the Chinese data have not been so widely accessible as data from other parts of the world. Much effort has been made by archaeologists in recent years to bridge the gap between Chinese specialists and international readers, and this book is also an endeavour of this kind.

This book is based on my Ph.D. dissertation research on settlement patterns of the Longshan culture, completed in 1994, and the contents of chapters 5 and 6 were partially published in 1996. However, a large part of the book presents new data and analysis, which is the result of my research in recent years.

I would like to first express my greatest appreciation to my dissertation advisors: Kwang-chih Chang, Richard Meadow, and Rosemary Joyce of the Anthropology Department at Harvard University, who gave me tremendous help and encouragement, not only during the course of writing the thesis but also throughout the years I was studying at Harvard. I am especially grateful to the late Professor K. C. Chang, whose advice and help at every step of my academic life have been extremely valuable in many ways.

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