

The Chinese Neolithic: Trajectories to Early States, Li Liu

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Li Liu's *The Chinese Neolithic* is an important book for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that it is the first book of its scope in English dealing with the Chinese Neolithic since K.C. Chang's 1986 edition of *The Archaeology of Ancient China*. As such, it will undoubtedly be an influential work, especially with scholars who don't read Chinese. For this reason, Liu is to be commended on attempting a synthesis that at once provides a badly needed English language update incorporating recent developments in Chinese archaeology and a coherent vision of some 5000 years of North-Central China's prehistory.

Liu's work is also important for its multidisciplinary approach to one of anthropological archaeology's perennial questions: social complexity and the rise of "civilizations" and early "states." By putting data from China into wider theoretical and comparative contexts, Liu's study both raises general theoretical issues and brings approaches to Chinese archaeology that either have not been tried before in China or are just beginning to be used. Set against the traditional historiographical orientation of most Chinese archaeological practice, Liu's work and analytical methods represent an example of new avenues of research for Chinese archaeologists and will hopefully foster interest in anthropological and sociological questions in Chinese archaeology.

The Chinese Neolithic is also significant as a kind of Neolithic prequel to Liu and Chen's 2003 book on Bronze Age China: *State Formation in Early China*. This fact in part explains the curious discrepancy between the title and contents of *The Chinese Neolithic*, which is not actually about the Chinese Neolithic, or at least not all of it, either chronologically or geographically. As Liu puts it herself in the second sentence of the book, "The aim of this book is to reveal the trajectories through which Neolithic culture developed from simple villages to complex political entities in the middle and lower Yellow River valley, the region where the first Chinese states evolved" (1). Thus, a more accurate title for the book might have been, *Trajectories to Early States: the Middle and Late North-Central Chinese Neolithic*. This discrepancy between title and content might not have mattered much to the book's argument if it weren't for the fact that recent (and not so recent) excavations in the south and south-west have uncovered large

Neolithic sites representing societies which at certain times and by some measures of complexity surpassed those of the north. A chief premise of the book, then, seems to be the traditional Chinese historiographic assumption that the Yellow River was the cradle of Chinese civilization and anything that happened outside of this area is not strictly relevant to the rise of "states" in China. Those purchasing this book with hopes of learning something about the exciting recent developments in the archaeology of Neolithic Sichuan, or the lower and middle Yangtze River regions, will be disappointed.

On the whole, Liu's argument is clearly formulated and her prose style is easy to read if a bit prone to jargon. The book as a whole is well structured with a simple, linear organization that suits her thesis. Chapter One, "setting the scene," does just that, setting out the geographic and temporal scope of the book and then going through a brief but useful introduction to the "Longshan" concept and its development from archaeological type-site to widespread "culture" to time period and the empirical, theoretical and socio-political developments that accompanied that shift. The discussion of the framing role of Nationalism and traditional historiography in Chinese archaeology will be especially useful for Western archaeologists unfamiliar with the background and assumptions of much Chinese archaeological practice.

In terms of Liu's own approach, after critiquing Chinese archaeologists for vulgar Marxist, teleological nationalist or blindly traditionalist approaches to the past, Liu lays out the following set of questions aimed at a deeper social-political understanding of Chinese prehistory,

"how and why certain material elements (such as ceramic and jade forms and motifs) were transported from one region to another, by what modes of activity items were manufactured and distributed, how the religious system was related to political structure, what socio-political variations existed in different regions, how social groups related with each other, what socio-political variations existed in different regions, how social groups related with each other, what social and environmental dynamics may have triggered social changes, and how societies developed towards complexity" (13).

While few prehistorians interested in social-political issues would disagree with these questions, the real issue is how concepts such as “political structures” and “societies” are understood and how one goes about investigating these questions archaeologically. For Liu, early complex polities are understood in terms of the centralization and specialization of their “decision making process” and the emergence of social and economic classes or strata. Archaeologically, according to Liu, these are detectable in the increasing divisions of residences into areas of specialized activity (including divisions of gender), separation of “commoner” and “elite” residences, hierarchy in mortuary treatment and increasingly complex settlement ranking in increasingly large settlement patterns. While these are staple methodologies of Anglo-American archaeology, there is a large literature on the difficulties of interpreting the results of these types of analyses, not to mention a growing chorus of dissent since at least the 80s regarding the ultimately functionalist and adaptationist assumptions that lurk behind the neo-evolutionary approach that Liu employs. Does increasingly gendered division of labor imply increasing social complexity? Is this the same kind of complexity that is said to increase with the number of levels of settlement size in a regional hierarchy? How exactly are domestic, community and polity structures related?

Compounding these issues is the fact that the data that Liu bases her argument on is frequently far from adequate to the tasks to which she wishes to put it. While Liu’s questions are excellent ones, the reader may feel that, like the discrepancy between the title and content of the book, there is a gap between what is proposed and what is delivered. To take just one example of this, the settlement survey data on which she must base 99% of her settlement hierarchy argument for both the Neolithic and the Bronze-Age (which forms the end-point of the trajectory she is attempting to describe and thus deeply implicated in her interpretation of the Middle-Lower Yellow River Neolithic) comes from non-systematic traditional survey results. Recent systematic surveys in the Luoyang basin area involving both coring and surface collection discovered “174 new sites, about 78.4% of the total of the known sites” (Erlitou Team, IA, CASS 2005: 21. *Chinese Archaeology* 5. Beijing: Social Science Press). Nor, as the discovery of the large Middle Shang walled center of Huanbeicheng in 1999 across the river from the most heavily excavated site in China demonstrates, are traditional surveys even reliable indicators of where the largest sites are. While Liu has been a pioneer of settlement survey in China, contributing the important Yi-Luo River Basin survey to the slowly growing body of systematic survey data, her faith that “cross regional analogy” can be employed to “overcome the insufficiency of the

Most of all, we should all try to look to each other's legal systems and draw upon general values such as constitutional democracy and human rights that transcend one's own system and experience.

data”(16) is misguided. The settlement hierarchy and rank size analyses that she uses require a degree of confidence in the representative-ness of the data that unsystematic surveys cannot give. And all this is assuming that the techniques of locational geography (abandoned by the discipline that invented it and increasingly critiqued in archaeological circles) and Liu’s rather mechanical interpretations of its results are valid in the first place.

Nevertheless, Liu’s use of recent attempts to reconstruct the paleo-environment are welcome components of any macro-analysis such as she is attempting and her argument that marine transgression may have contributed to the Dawenkou expansion is intriguing. The big issue, however, is again the quality of the data and its poor chronological resolution. For instance, since the maximum marine transgression (5570-2200 BC) entirely covers the Dawenkou period (4100-2600), more evidence is necessary to actually demonstrate that environmental changes forced people to move.

Liu’s attempt to analyze household structure is likewise a positive step that will hopefully be taken up by others working in Chinese archaeology. Her actual analysis is again hampered by lack of good data and a tendency to make over-simplifying assumptions such as the equation of household divisions and social evolution (by this logic, the nuclear households and blurring or erasure of gendered divisions of labor in 21st century Western households signify social devolution). On the empirical front, the use of data from one archaeological culture to make culture specific arguments about another culture is especially problematic as on page 37 where she uses Dawenkou and Longshan burial data to determine the gender association of tool types (on the assumption that grave goods directly symbolize the occupation of the deceased) and then uses this in analyzing the gender divisions of Qujialing house based on its artifact scatter.

In the end, although readers who are critical of neo-evolutionary approaches to social complexity might find some of Liu’s assumptions a bit naive and her interpretations occasionally forced, she presents a bold and clear narrative of the “trajectories” towards “states” in China as she understands them. Whether to argue or agree with, this book broaches many important topics that have not been adequately discussed in Chinese archaeological circles, and so deserves to be read. The multi-disciplinary breadth and geographic and chronological scope of her analysis is another strength of the work and worthy of emulation. If not a definitive, updated account of the Chinese Neolithic, it is at least a clearly reasoned argument calling for debate.

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