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