



From people's commune to household responsibility: Ethnoarchaeological perspectives of millet production in prehistoric northeast China



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ABSTRACT

Food and food preparation relates to more than biological needs alone. As a pioneer of food anthropology, Mary Douglas, argued “Many of the important questions about food habits are moral and social. How many people come to your table? How regularly? Why those names and not others?” (Douglas, 1984). In this paper, we draw upon observations of contemporary farmers in North China, to explore changing social relations of insiders and outsiders in prehistoric Chifeng, northeast China. We develop a hypothesis that the social framework of food production in northeast China underwent a significant transformation between the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. By reference to two prehistoric sites in particular, that hypothesis posits that widespread pooling and sharing food were common practices in the Neolithic period. People had an acceptance of risk and reward shared by the group as a whole. In contrast to that, Bronze Age society displayed a more ‘closed’ strategy, where food resources are shared among members of the household but much less between different households. Although under markedly different social and political contexts, this contrast has interesting resonances with the recent shift in social organization of Chinese society: from people's commune to household responsibility.

1. Introduction

Food preparation is very much a part of everyday discourse, yet relates to more than basic biological needs. In all cultures, preparing a meal is a social activity. As a pioneer of food anthropology, Mary Douglas, argued: “Many of the important questions about food habits are moral and social. How many people come to your table? How regularly? Why those names and not others?” (Douglas, 1966). In this paper, we draw upon observations of contemporary and archaeological farms in north China, to develop a hypothesis about changing patterns in the social context of food production and preparation in prehistory.

As part of that, we will shift our focus from the formal feast, which has drawn much archaeological attention (e.g. Bray, 2003; Dietler and Hayden, 2001), to analysis of daily meals, and consider the establishment of social bonds through the common or mundane meal. Archaeological study of food consumption has typically drawn more from ceramics, faunal remains, and spatial locations such as dining rooms and hearths. In the case of plant foods, social engagement with consumption follows a continuum from harvesting through to cooking and serving. While the discernible archaeological debris from meat consumption (cf. skeletal remains), are largely deposited after food

consumption, the recognizable debris from plant consumption (cf. processing remains) are more in evidence from stages before food consumption.

2. The present and the past

Spatial patterns of grain production have repeatedly been used by European and American archaeobotanists to move from observed patterns of crop-related refuse in the present to inferring social relations of production in the past. Among these uses is the work by one of the current authors (Jones, 1985), as well as work by Hillman, 1973, 1984), G. Jones (1984, 1987), van der Veen (1991), Stevens (2003), Hubbard and Clapham, 1992, Atalay and Hastorf (2006), Fuller and Stevens (2009) and Fuller et al. (2014), and these approaches have been valuably extended to Asian crops by Thompson (1996), Reddy (1997), Harvey and Fuller (2005), Song et al. (2012).

We follow a similar approach, drawing upon our own observations and interviews with contemporary millet farmers in north China, to develop a hypothesis of social relations of grain production in prehistoric northeast China. The strengths and weaknesses of doing so are much the same in each of these studies, and indeed have much in

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common with the wider range of uses of the ethnographic present to structure hypotheses about the archaeological past. In considering such uses, archaeologists have referred back to Mary Hesse's delineation of three components of the comparison between two entities; positive, negative, and neutral analogy (Hesse, 1963). In this particular instance, the positive analogy between the present and the past includes: their shared geography, their resource base of the two Asian millets, their experience of agrarian flux among village farming communities. The negative analogy includes: their distinct chronologies, differences in energy supply, industrial complexity, and sociopolitical context. The neutral analogy includes eating and drinking taboos impacted upon social distinctions whose status as positive or negative analogies is unknown but could guide our hypothesis. Following Hesse's logic, the constellation of remaining observable attributes serves as a resource for hypothesis building. Here, we employ observations of contemporary and recent agrarian practice in north China to examine evidence for agrarian practice from two prehistoric settlements: Xinglonggou (Neolithic) and Sanzuodian (Bronze Age).

3. From 'people's commune' to 'household responsibility'

During the past four decades, Chinese society has experienced a shift from the prevailing pattern of collectivism to the rise of individualism. In rural contexts, social organization changed from 'people's commune' (人民公社) to 'household responsibility' (家庭联产承包责任制) models. This change provides us with a parallel dynamic of agrarian change in the past.

In the Maoist period, the rural economy of China was organized according to a people's commune system, or the so-called eating in a large cooking pan (吃大锅饭). A commune was the large gathering of people sharing a common life and divided in turn into production brigades and production teams. A production team was the basic farming production and consumption unit. In a typical team (10–20 households/50–100 people), everything was shared. All farming activities were to be centrally assigned. During the height of that movement, particularly between 1958 and 1962, private cooking was banned and replaced by communal dining. Private kitchens became redundant (as well as the markets), and objects in the private kitchen, such as tables, chairs, cooking utensils and pans were all contributed to the commune's kitchen. This communal dining was mostly abolished due to the famine in the early 60s. A production team, however, remained as the central unit of rural lives until 1978 (some people's communes and production teams survived until the 1990s).

What was originally owned by the households, lands, private animals and stored grains was largely passed to the production team, brigade and commune, a system called three levels of ownership of the means of production (三级所有制) launched in 1962. Although peasant families were allowed to have small pieces of land to grow vegetables and animal fodder, and were allowed to raise domestic animals privately, those fodder lands and domestic animals were officially owned by the team or the commune. While we lack systematic ethnographic records for the use of those 'fodder' lands, anecdotal memories suggest that any privatized activities were risky, and could result in serious damage to peasant families. The communes, brigades and teams particularly exercised management and control of all rural resources, from labour to land between 1958 and 1978.

After Mao's death, this system was brought to end by Deng Xiaoping's agricultural reforms (Cannon and Jenkins, 1990). Production teams were largely disbanded and replaced by a new system, termed 'household responsibility'. As the name indicates, economic risk is borne by the individual household. Under this system, the rights of organizing farming activities and private cooking were returned to individual households. The system was first adopted for agriculture in 1981 and later extended to other sectors of the economy.



Fig. 1. Sites mentioned in the text.

4. Contemporary observations

As in most Chinese villages, the villages for which we describe our observations below are undergoing a tremendous process of change. Those observations certainly do not reveal aspects of a "traditional" economy (we doubt there exists such state); they instead provide us with glimpses of the background to a constant changing process in the everyday life of the people. A recurrent theme in our observation is that millet processing is organized by two distinct types of labour units: community and household. The problems arising from the present situation are results of the interaction of these two forces. Within the contemporary landscape of north China, it is thus possible to encounter examples both of a surviving collectivist approach and the re-established household approach.

We observed contemporary processing activities of two types of millets (broomcorn and foxtail), both in terms of the debris they might generate and which we might recover from the archaeological record, and in terms of the social context in which we observed those activities taking place. We undertook these observations in a number of localities in North China (Fig. 1), including Changqing in Shandong, Huanghuacheng in Beijing and Baoriwusu in Inner Mongolia. In these villages, non-mechanised millet processing is still in use. Similar observations have been conducted by Song et al. (2012).

Proceeding through the processing sequence, the first discernible intervention is the gathering of the crop from the living plants. In most cases, millet is harvested by low cutting of the stalks, often by cutting handfuls of stalks with a sickle. Low cutting is typically associated with larger blades, which may have a loose correlation with larger fields (see Fig. 2a). However, it also incorporates a larger range and quantity of weeds into the harvest. The only case that we saw of an alternative method of harvesting was in a village near Beijing, Huanghuacheng. In

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