Full length article

Emerging approaches to the development of urbanization in early China

Tricia E. Owlett[a,*], Li Liu[a], Anne P. Underhill[b]

[a] *Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, 521 Memorial Way, Knight Building, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305, USA*
[b] *Department of Anthropology, 10 Sachem Street, Yale University, CT 06511, USA*

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ABSTRACT

This special issue of *Archaeological Research in Asia* brings together thirteen articles that reflect many of the recent trends in early urbanism in China. By way of introduction to this thematic issue on Early Urbanism in China, we summarize the papers in this issue and offer a brief survey of intellectual developments that signal recent trends. This collection provides comparable case studies from diverse time periods and distinct regions within China.

1. Introduction

Urbanism has been an important feature of China's history for more than four thousand years, yet its origins and development remain to be fully explored. For the purposes of this introduction, urbanization is here taken in the broadest sense, rather than a trait-based list of criteria. It may include one or more of the following characteristics: 1.) large-scale demographic density and/or site size, 2.) Socio-political or ritual centrality within a regional polity, and 3.) intra-site social and cultural heterogeneity and diversity. Significantly, emerging new data suggest that early cities in China tend to exhibit social variation across multiple spatial scales, from households to neighborhoods or districts, with respect to identity, socioeconomic status, communities of practice in craft production, and occupational specialization (Wynne-Jones, 2007). However as people integrated their everyday lives into larger networks and communities in early China, they also became differentiated through the creation of new hierarchies, collective struggles, and the rise of symbols and ideologies that communicated distinction, wealth, and power (Liu and Chen, 2003, 2012; Shelach, 2015). Although cities have been the focus of archaeological research since the beginning of the discipline, we hope to use this edited volume to introduce new primary information about China that has recently emerged through excavations and analyses, to question and revise previously held assumptions held about early urbanism, along with applying existing and innovative theoretical models to well-known archaeological contexts. There is still a considerable amount of research to be done, and we hope that these papers act as an initial step to inspire further work in China from multiple perspectives.

This special issue of *Archaeological Research in Asia* grew out of a three-day conference, "The Origins and Development of Urbanization in Early China: A Comparative Perspective." which was organized at the Archaeology Center, Stanford University, California on 21st-23rd April 2015. The conference succeeded in assembling scholars and students from many different countries including China, Australia, Canada, and the USA with specializations in archaeology, architecture, art history, and anthropology. Engaging and lively discussions, both formal and informal, took place throughout the duration of the conference as participants exchanged ideas and perspectives on research methodologies and recent advances in the study of early cities. Given a new wave of research on this topic over the last decade, such a gathering seemed both appropriate and timely.

Early Chinese cities are unique in many ways, making them hard to fit into models developed elsewhere for transitions to urbanism. Early Chinese cities differ from those in other regions in regards to variability in size, the concentration and density of urban populations, and broader issues such as the role and timing of the early state and the development and role of writing systems (Keightley, 1983; Yoffee, 2004:94–100). Finally, cities in China tend to be quite transitory in nature, quickly developing and then promptly being abandoned within a span of a few hundred years (von Falkenhausen, 2008). Furthermore, archaeologists have commonly turned to monuments and monumental architecture as one important indexical marker of the rise of the city (Childe, 1950; Marcus and Sabloff, 2008: 3–26). Powerful individuals are believed to sponsor monumental architecture as a symbol of centralized authority. In early China, there is however some heated debate related to this topic. Some scholars note that many cities in early China do not measure up to classic examples of monumental constructions known from Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica in terms of creating large edifices for the display of power (McIntosh, 1991; Wu, 1995; von Falkenhausen, 2017-this volume). Anyang is often cited within these discussions as it

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prominently features clustered residential zones which were dispersed and seem unplanned.

On the other hand, other scholars highlight the construction of monumental-scale public structures such as large houses, public buildings, special purpose structures, massive walls constructed of earth and stone, and objects such as big *ding* bronze cauldrons at urban settlements. The authors argue that these would have necessitated tremendous labor expenditures, complex forms of labor organization, and would have had materialized the ambitions and resources of power of a few elite individuals (Childs-Johnson, 2012; Demattè, 1999; Shelach and Jaffe, 2014).

Furthermore, there is little consensus among scholars of early China about the chronology, nature, and sociopolitical features of early cities. Chinese cities exhibited great diversity in size, population magnitude and density, architectural layout, as well as political and economic relations both within the urban center and within its broader hinterland. These features make it difficult for scholars to develop and agree upon any given unifying theory to describe either the nature of urbanism or the urbanization process in China. Some scholars base definitions of urbanism upon large site size, the occupation of the top tier of a three or four-tiered regional settlement hierarchy, and the presence of defensive walled features. Conversely many others prefer to refer to early cities in more neutral terms such as walled towns or settlements, central places, capitals, or to completely disregard the concept of urbanism entirely. However, most archaeologists consider that the urbanization process occurred in many steps in early China (e.g. von Falkenhausen, 2008; Xu, 2000), with the Eastern Zhou period representing the fullest and least contentious manifestation of urbanism with political centralization and a highly developed market economy (Shen 1994, 2003).

The investigation of Chinese urbanism is intimately tied with the beginnings of modern archaeology in China. Beginning with excavations of the Late Shang site of Yinxu at Anyang in 1928, Chinese archaeologists began to uncover the remains of ancient structures and large-scale palatial edifices (Li, 1977). Other important early investigations of city sites include the second Shang capital of Ao at Zhengzhou (Henan Provincial Institute, 2001), Erlitou (Xu, 1959), and the Zhou capital at Luoyang (Chinese Academy of Sciences, 1959). However much of this research was often descriptive, cultural historical, or aimed at charting the structure of individual cities, including the architectural layout of their walls and their size. Similarly, as Chinese archaeology existed for many years as a largely historical discipline (von Falkenhausen, 1993), many of these archaeological sites were often correlated with the linking of sites to historically known dynastic capitals. However since the publication of these pioneering archaeological reports, the literature in the Chinese language on early Chinese urbanism has become extremely rich in the past 50 years (He, N., 2004, 2009; Institute of Archaeology, CASS, 2014; Ren, 1998; Xu 1997, 1999, 2002a, 2002b; Zhongmei Lianhe, 2016).

The study of Chinese urbanism has also had a long history in western anthropological archaeology, particularly from a functionalist perspective. For Chang, urban settlements serve as centers whose economic, administrative, and religious activities and institutions all directly impacted their hinterlands (Chang 1962, 1974, 1976:22–71, 1980; 1983; 1985). Other Western anthropological approaches have stressed the ritual function of the city. Scholars such as Wheatley have noted that a Chinese city can be thought of as a microcosm of the wider cosmos (Wheatley, 1971), or as Robin Yates (1997) argues, early China had its own version of city-states in which the countryside participated in centralized management of ritual within the capital.

Another important model and recent trend in the study of urbanization in China sees the development of cities as an inescapable product of rapid population growth, settlement nucleation, and the rise of new production and exchange systems associated with development of states. These models have found wide applicability in global case studies of urbanization and state formation (Algaze, 2005; Bowman and Wilson, 2011; Haas et al., 1987; Johnson and Earle, 2000; Pearson, 2000; Wirth, 1938; Wright, 1977, 2007), but only have begun to be challenged and rethought within the context of early China. For example, several scholars have demonstrated that the control of important raw materials (e.g., lithics, metals, and salt) in resource-rich regions and the development of associated craft production and specialization in urban centers formed the core of the political economy in early states of the Central Plains. These activities enabled elites to establish and maintain political authority, stimulated urban growth, and demanded high agricultural productivity (e.g., Liu, 2006; Liu and Chen, 2001, 2003; Liu et al., 2013; Zhai, 2012). Furthermore, there is an increasing amount of data suggesting that craft production and specialization for market exchange was a crucial component of urban development in the capital city of Yinxu, Anyang (Campbell, et al. 2011; He et al., 2015). Similarly, specialized production of bone tools and jade *jue* earrings were vital components of the urban economy in the ancestral capital city of Zhouyuan in Shaanxi province (Sun, 2008; Zhao, 2017) during the late Shang and Western Zhou periods (ca. 1300–771 BCE). These new findings have provided a more holistic picture for the dynamics of urbanism in ancient China.

Despite decades of archaeological research, we still have many limitations in our understanding of urbanism in China. Discussions of early urbanism have largely been limited to the Central Plains region; less is known about the cities that also developed other regions such as southeastern China, northeast China, and the Sichuan Basin. Despite these shortcomings, Chinese archaeology is currently well-positioned to contribute to and benefit from a more holistic anthropological approach to Chinese cities for several reasons. First, a legacy of scholarship shaped by craft production, prestige goods, and specialization is at the center of several long-standing debates surrounding the chronology and causes of major technological, and social transformations within early China (Flad, 2011; Li, Y., 2007; Liu et al., 2013; Underhill, 2002). Secondly, regional settlement-pattern studies in Chinese archaeology have expanded greatly, allowing us to begin to reconstruct urbanism from larger scales, diverse time periods, and geographic regions (Bo and Shelach, 2015; Drennan and Dai, 2010; Fang et al., 2015; Flad et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2004; Shelach, 1998; Underhill et al., 1998, 2002, 2008; Zhongmei Rizhao, 2012). However, these studies must also be supplemented by individual case studies that highlight the internal social organization and underlying forces working within particular urban settlements (Cheung et al., 2017; Jing et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2016).

The papers in this special issue of the *Archaeological Research in Asia* showcase the array of new theoretical, methodological, and topical themes potentially expanded through a comparative approach to urbanism in Chinese archaeology. They are arranged chronologically and span from the late Neolithic period to the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (from the third millennium BC to the third century BC) (Table 1).

Some papers within this volume are more theoretical in nature and work to redefine the fundamental concept of urbanism in early cities worldwide. Rowan Flad (Flad, 2017) utilizes a comparative approach between Anyang and Sanxingdui to argue that urbanism can be viewed as a technology in multiple senses of the word. Cities function as both a fulfillment of certain economic and ritual relations among inhabitants while simultaneously and more abstractly represent an assemblage of certain types of practices and components. Sun Zhouyong and colleagues' paper (2017) similarly demonstrates that the discovery of Shimao in Shaanxi Province revealed a unique trajectory to urbanism in the northern Loess plateau. Parallel to the Neolithic complex societies established by agriculturalists in other parts of China, Shimao played a central role in the spiritual and political world among agro- pastoralists of the north Loess Plateau region.

One prominent theme to emerge from this series of papers is the organization of craft production and its relationship to the regional urban political economy. Cities are often theorized to provide important services and manufactured goods to people in the countryside