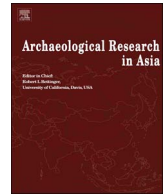




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# Rethinking urbanism in the early Bronze Age of China: The role of craft specialists and community politics in the social construction of Yanshi Shangcheng

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## ABSTRACT

This paper challenges traditional models of Chinese urbanism which emphasize the role of elites in the urbanization process while deemphasizing the role of other social groups. Synthesizing data from recent excavation reports from the early Bronze Age site of Yanshi Shangcheng, and primary research on lifeways of potters, the contribution of craft specialists to urban development is evaluated for different phases of the city's evolution. Results indicate that artisans, residing in a distinct city district, were instrumental in transforming the city, both spatially and socially, during an expansion phase, reshaping the urban plan and transforming its demographics. Implications of the spatial segregation of craft specialists are explored, including the construction of artisan identity in local communities and status building in these communities through the practice of potent rituals. Findings imply a more complex political dynamic in the built urban environment than traditionally formulated for this period in northern China.

## 1. Introduction

Urban settlements of the northern Chinese Bronze Age have been depicted as “kings' cities” with highly centralized elite power (e.g. Chang, 1974; Lee, 2004; Shen, 1994, 2003; Steinhardt, 2013; Wheatley, 1971). Religion factors heavily into these models, but it is the religion of central elites that is seen as a primary source of political power (e.g. Chang, 1983; Wang, 1999). The settlement of Yanshi Shangcheng is cited as a prime example of such a royal city, characterized by expressions of dominant power and central control articulated in its well-defined palace-ceremonial complex (e.g. von Falkenhausen, 2008; Zou, 1999). The entrenchment of this template is apparent in its durability over the decades and in its propagation into scholarship of other regional archaeological traditions and comparative studies (e.g. McIntosh and McIntosh, 2003; Trigger, 2003).

Among the shortcomings of the traditional models is that they focus on overly simplistic definitions of power; frame urbanization in terms of large-scale processes; and emphasize material culture that is more visible archaeologically — monumental constructions and durable elite culture (especially “palaces” and “bronzes”). The prioritization of kings and elites effectively writes other social groups and individuals out of the narrative. Another limitation is that the traditional models are based on now-outdated information. With the rapid recovery of archaeological data accompanying modern urbanization in China,

earlier frameworks need to be reevaluated. This paper presents a case study of the ancient city site of Yanshi Shangcheng, utilizing recently published excavation data to analyze urbanism in terms of smaller-scale processes, considering local political contexts and social groups typically overlooked or oversimplified in the traditional models.

## 1.1. Models of early Chinese urbanism

A foundational model of early Chinese urbanism was first provided for Western scholars in the writings of K.C. Chang (1962, 1974, 1976, 1983, 1986, 1991). Chang proposed that the earliest cities in Bronze Age China were seats of the royal lineage — political and religious centers which differed from the dense habitation centers characteristic of other parts of the world. Urbanization in ancient China was driven by the accumulation of power and wealth by an emergent elite group comprising a minority of the population that exerted power over the majority, not by development of technologies of production. According to Chang's assertion, the emergence of an “all-powerful kingship” resulted from elites harnessing specialized craft production, especially the new bronze technology for casting ritual vessels and weapons, not agricultural tools and increased food production as in other parts of the world. Chang argued that ritual and warfare were enriching and empowering practices that led the elites down their “path to political authority” (Chang, 1983, 1986: 365). Trigger relied on Chang's ideas

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for the Chinese component of his comparative study of early civilizations. He proposed that ordinary people in Shang society would have had only limited contact with the supernatural realm whereas the king, at the “apex of society,” was the most qualified to manipulate supernatural power by sponsoring divination rituals and conducting proper sacrifices to benefit the kingdom (Trigger, 2003: 79).

Wheatley's (1971) influential work *Pivot of the Four Quarters* aligns with Chang's framework as well. He proposed that early Chinese cities were ceremonial and administrative centers dedicated to religious and political pursuits of the elites. The core enclaves of cities such as Yinxi 殷墟 and Zhengzhou 郑州 were exclusive habitation areas for members of the royal lineages, priests, guards, and a few appointed craftsmen. Peasantry and artisans, by contrast, lived in villages across the surrounding countryside, supplying the center with food and ritual goods. von Falkenhausen (2008) has also echoed the traditional framework in a description of the site of Yanshi Shangcheng (the focus of this paper), which he proposed was as a “place of elite settlement, religious activity, and manufacture of prestige goods”. According to von Falkenhausen's assessment, “the inhabitants were apparently either persons of elevated status or retainers and servants attached to elite households. The ordinary population lived elsewhere; its settlements have not been archaeologically located” (von Falkenhausen, 2008: 218). However, as I will demonstrate in this paper, archaeological excavation inside the ancient city walls at Yanshi Shangcheng has revealed habitation areas of non-elite people and craft production of non-luxury items at the site, thereby contesting the elite-centered models.

The traditional models may well be critiqued as orientalist (Said, 1979), dichotomizing exotic ritualistic and superstitious ways of the East with rational material and economic-based approaches of the West. There are also shades of “Oriental despotism” (Wittfogel, 1957) in the traditional models, although Chang (1974: 11) has denied the applicability of the term: “the kings were no stereotype of Oriental despots who commanded by whim and killed at will. They were more successful in leading their people... they were able to convince the masses that their interests and the king's coincide.”

A few studies have shifted away from the elite-centered model. In a study of the early Bronze Age site of Erlitou, Liu (2006) examined the temporal and spatial distribution of features and artifacts related to craft production and concluded that Erlitou was not only a political and ritual center but also an economic center with a large population of farmers and craft producers. This assigns to Erlitou economic characteristics similar to ancient cities such as those of Mesopotamia thereby countering Chang's hypothesis contrasting the politico-religious city of ancient China with the economic-based city of the ancient Western world. Recent work based on a comprehensive survey of currently available archaeological data by Liu and Chen (2012: 295–6) has affirmed an economic model of early cities in northern China. Liu and Chen assert that while certain aspects of the foundational studies concerning the central role of elites in urban development are correct, such as hierarchical planning and central location of elite compounds, data suggest that craft production was also a significant component of urban development. A study by Reinhart (2015a) examined social differentiation at Yanshi Shangcheng through comparison of foodways and feasting between members of a high elite group and a community of urban craft specialists. The study illustrated that craft specialists were engaged in empowering ritual practices such as feasting and sacrifice similar to those practiced by the city's high elites and ordinarily attributed to elites. Therefore, sociopolitical dynamics were more complex at Yanshi Shangcheng than simple hierarchical models predict.

### 1.2. Social identity of craft specialists

Like a portrait photograph, where the subject is beautifully defined against a creamy bokeh, “commoners” in archaeological narratives are

too often blurred as the backdrop for a portrait of elite power (Pauketat, 2000). The value of moving away from object-centered approaches that homogenize craft specialists as “commoners” has been recognized (e.g. Childs, 1998; Costin, 1998; Brumfiel, 1998; Sinopoli, 1998) but not yet applied to studies of early urban environments in northern China. Many studies explicitly or implicitly rely on Chang's (1980) early formulation of the primacy of “lineage” identity of early Bronze Age artisans. Chinese archaeologists have also focused heavily on questions concerning social status and elite identity through examination of the symbolic value of material culture, especially prestige goods in mortuary and ritual contexts (Chang, 1983; Kim et al., 1994; Liu, 1996, 2003) as well as elite feasting (Fung, 2000; Nelson, 2003; Reinhart, 2015a; Underhill, 2002).

The following sections of this paper refocus urbanism of the Chinese Bronze Age away from elites towards the contribution of non-elites (craft specialists) and reframe urban development in terms of smaller-scale dynamics. In Section 2, the site of Yanshi Shangcheng is presented in its historic and geographical contexts, highlighting excavation background and bias that is critically considered during analysis. In Section 3, excavation data related to craft production are analyzed according to three stages of development of the city. In Section 4, social identity of the Yanshi Shangcheng specialists is considered through analysis of residential patterns, burial data, and inscriptions on pottery. In Section 5, political dynamics in the city are considered through analysis of urban districts, building orientation, and evidence of potent ritual practices of craft specialists.

## 2. The settlement and ruins of Yanshi Shangcheng

The site of Yanshi Shangcheng 偃师商城 (“Shang City at Yanshi”) is located in Henan Province of China, in the modern city of Yanshi, a county-level city situated within the prefecture-level city of Luoyang. It was founded in the early Bronze Age, during the Erligang period, which is also referred to as the early Shang period (c. 1600 to 1400 BCE) (Du, 2003; Liu and Chen, 2012; Steinke and Ching, 2014; Thorp, 2006; Yuan, 2013). The settlement was built in proximity to the site of Erlitou (within 7 km), which was occupied during the Erlitou (1900 to 1500 BCE) and early Erligang periods. Although Yanshi Shangcheng was not as large as the contemporaneous city of Zhengzhou Shangcheng 郑州商城 (“Shang City at Zhengzhou”), located 80 km to its east, its perimeter wall and impressive architectural and engineering features indicate it was a significant settlement (Fig. 1). Yanshi Shangcheng has been subject to various interpretations based on dynastic histories described in received texts and there is debate about its historic identity — such as its status as a Shang capital site (e.g. Gao et al., 1998; Zou, 1999). But as Liu and Xu (2007) illustrate in their critical reanalysis of the identity of Erlitou through archaeological evidence, a reliance on historic texts, myths, and legends is potentially misleading.

Yanshi Shangcheng was located in the resource-rich environment of the Yellow River valley in northern China's Central Plains region. It was established adjacent to a large lake (circumference 1.5 km) and close to riverine transportation routes of the Luo River and its source, the Yellow River. The settlement also benefitted from natural defensive barriers as it was situated south of the Mang Hills (elevation 300 m) and northwest of the Song Mountains (elevation 1400 m). Communities inhabited the local area for thousands of years prior to the founding of Yanshi Shangcheng (Institute of Archaeology, 2013: 120–2). Features such as pits and houses from the neolithic Yangshao (5000 to 3000 BCE) and Longshan (3000 to 1900 BCE) periods, and from the early Bronze Age Erlitou period, underlie Erligang layers at the site, though in many places Yanshi Shangcheng features were constructed in or upon sterile soil. Features dating to the post-Shang Eastern Zhou, Han/Wei, Tang/Song, and Ming/Qing periods disturb parts of the Erligang layers, though no settlements were built directly on top of the site until modern urban development (Institute of Archaeology, 2013:118).

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