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The economic role of cities in Eastern Zhou China

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A B S T R A C T

An oft-mentioned aspect of the comprehensive sociopolitical and economic transformation of continental East Asia during the Eastern Zhou period (771–221 BCE) is the rise of a market economy undergirded by extensive trading networks in which urban centers—cities—were the principal nodes. This paper takes a preliminary look at the archaeological evidence presently available that can help us understand this development in a concrete fashion. What were Eastern Zhou-period cities like, and how did they change in response to the economic challenges of the epoch?

1. Long-term changes

Some apodictic remarks to begin with (cf. Falkenhausen, 2008): (1) A wall alone does not a city make—pace the double meaning of the Chinese word *cheng* 城, which means both “city wall” and “city.” (2) Size alone does not a city make: large villages can significantly outsize small cities. (3) A large, concentrated population alone does not a city make; the transformation of such a population into a citizenry with a conscious sense of its own urban identity is a separate step that is sometimes taken and sometimes not.

For a settlement to qualify as a city in the full sense, it has to have a focus: be it as a religious sanctuary (as famously argued by Wheatley, 1971, following Fustel de Coulanges, 1864), as a seat of political power (as emphasized by Chang, 1974), or as a place of economic activity (e.g., manufacture and/or exchange); or as several of these simultaneously. A city in the full sense is a locus of urban life—its inhabitants participate in an urban culture that significantly distinguishes the city from its rural surroundings. Yoffee (2005) has usefully emphasized that the contrast between the two becomes exacerbated over time; urbanization goes hand with ruralization. In ancient China, arguably, this development turned out to be particularly lengthy and drawn-out, perhaps more so than in some other parts of the ancient world. It entailed the transformation of the central settlements of single-lineage dominated micro-polities—settlements that were hubs in a redistributive agrarian-based economy—into centers of expanded commercial, manufacturing, and administrative functions in an emerging market economy that were the homes of people and groups of heterogeneous origins. This transformation also entailed significant changes in the cultural conceptualization of space—changes that can be partly traced through texts (see Lewis, 2006).

As I have argued elsewhere (Falkenhausen, 2008), it may have been

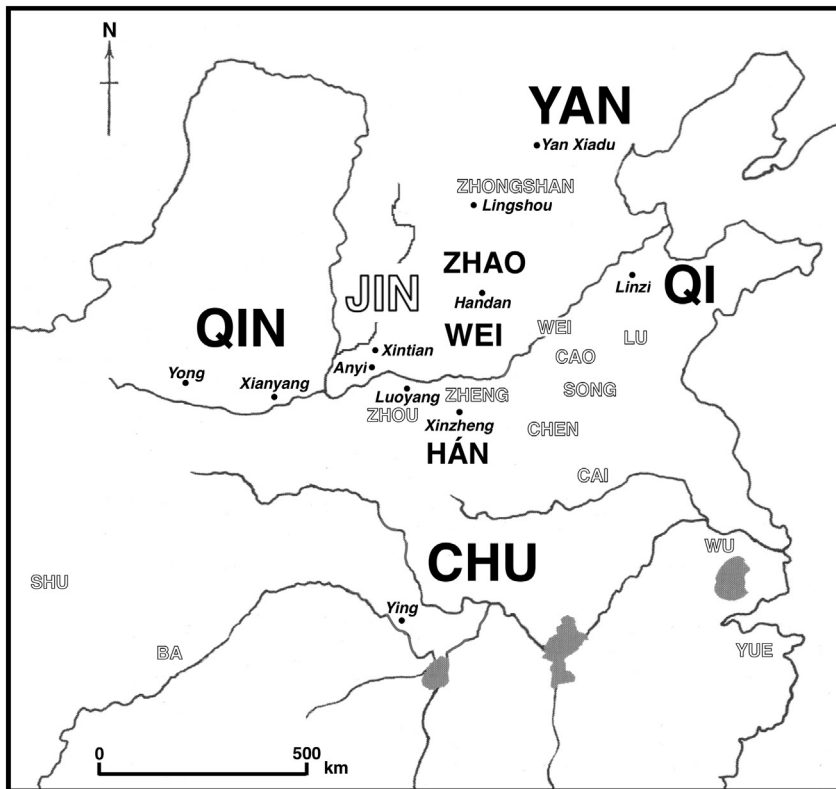
only in Eastern Zhou (770–256 BCE) times that urban centers emerged in which membership in the citizenry was based primarily on residence rather than on kinship—one criterion often regarded as important for the presence of an urban culture, or of urban life. What archaeologists refer to as “cities” during earlier times may have been, in most respects, merely large versions of a standard type of settlement inhabited by the members of one internally stratified kin-group (Chang, 1976; Falkenhausen, 2006); there was, in other words, little or no generic difference between such “cities” and villages, and the settlement system can be conceptualized as a pyramid of essentially similar settlements that differed mainly in size. Since the settlements at the top of these pyramids functioned as political and religious centers, there is no reason to doubt that they were, in some sense, cities; but one can hardly overemphasize the transformative importance of the changes that occurred during Eastern Zhou times. The result of these changes was an enhanced typological resemblance between Chinese cities and cities elsewhere in the ancient world (Hansen, 2000; Marcus and Sabloff, 2008). (As in the case of various simultaneously occurring changes in other aspects of early Chinese culture, one wonders whether they were induced by some form of cultural contact with areas to the West; this question, though unanswerable on present evidence, should no longer be regarded as taboo.)

Even though the central settlements of Western Zhou (ca. 1046–771 BCE) and Springs and Autumns period (770–ca. 450 BCE) polities had some of the characteristics of “city states,” one must realize that they were not independent political entities, but were constituent parts of larger polities with some degree of overarching political and administrative authority over their surrounding territories (the same is true of many “city states” in other parts of the world, e.g., of the Greek cities of Asia Minor). This remained true as the power of the royal Zhou waned and some of the regional polities developed into major political

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Map 1. Eastern Zhou China with the names of the major polities and some of their capitals. The seven major kingdoms of the Warring States periods are indicated in black. (Map prepared by Hsiu-p'ing Lee.)

players, gradually incorporating the smaller local polities in their vicinity, a process that culminated during the Warring States period (ca. 450 BCE–221 BCE).

One of the crucial developments during the Eastern Zhou period was the definition of clear boundaries between these larger political units (Stumpfeldt, 1970), which resulted in fundamental changes to the political-territorial structure from about the mid-sixth century BCE onward. The empty or ambiguous zones in between the former nucleated polities disappeared as centralized governmental authority was strengthened; apparently, the formerly marginal “lakes, marshes, mountains, and forests” came to be managed directly by the central authorities, enhancing the economic power of the rulers over possible aristocratic competitors and hastening the decline of the old social order.

Another important change with respect to the history of urbanism during the first millennium BCE was the multiplication of cities within individual polities. During Western Zhou and Early to Middle Springs and Autumns times, each of the lineage-centered polities typically contained only one central settlement, which served chiefly as that polity's political and religious center and as the residence of the heads of its governing lineage (the hierarchy of central settlements of different sizes coinciding, at least in principle, with that of the aristocratic ranks of the rulers of the respective polities). By contrast, in later Eastern Zhou times, the development of efficient bureaucratic régimes with an encompassing fiscal reach over their territories (Lewis, 1999) brought about the formation, within each of the major states, of hierarchically integrated networks of cities of different sizes, with the capitals at the top. Aside from serving as political, religious, and administrative centers, cities now acquired a greatly enhanced economic role. Such developments, as well, came to fruition during the Warring States period.

These general tendencies are known through transmitted texts, in part fleshed out by recently excavated manuscripts. The Western Zhou-period bronze inscriptions contain indications of the early stages in the development of a bureaucratic system of administration (Li, 2006, 2008; Shaughnessy, 1999), which we find in a fully developed form by

the Warring States period. The crucial intermediary steps in its development seem to have taken place during the approximately three centuries of the Springs and Autumns period, for which pertinent evidence is relatively sparse (but see Pines, 2002; Falkenhausen, 1999). In this study I intend to explore how archaeology can contribute to a fuller understanding of Eastern Zhou cities by producing bodies of evidence independent of, and speaking to issues different from those addressed in, the texts. Archaeological materials may be expected to be especially useful in helping to trace economic developments.

2. New features of Warring States-period cities

The task is not an easy one. One reason is the impermanence of early settlement remains in China, which makes their remains tremendously difficult not only to excavate but also to draw useful information from. The relative lack of monumentality of early Chinese architecture constitutes an element of contrast vis-à-vis other parts of the ancient world (Wu, 1995). Nevertheless, thanks to almost a century of archaeological research, some overall tendencies can now be traced. Archaeologically observable innovations in Eastern Zhou period cities (especially after about the middle of the sixth century BC) include the following.

- (1) The number and density of distribution of urban sites greatly increased over time; Xu (2000) lists 40 cities for the Neolithic period, 39 for “Xia” through Western Zhou, and 428 for Eastern Zhou (ca. 770–256 BCE); Emura (2000) enumerates 51 for Western Zhou to Springs and Autumns, 185 (plus 16 in outlying areas) for Warring States, and 253 for the Qin and Han periods. Even though the two datasets are somewhat difficult to reconcile, there can be no question of the reality of a huge and apparently quite sudden leap in urbanization sometime during Eastern Zhou times, probably signaling a thoroughgoing change in the nature of urban settlements.
- (2) The size and population of the capitals of major territorial states (Map 1) greatly increased; Linzi of Qi during the Warring States period, with a walled area of some 15.5 km², may have had more

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