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"Houses" in the Wansan Society, Neolithic Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I utilized the house society concept to not only interpret how Neolithic Wansan people in Taiwan might have organized themselves, but also to understand the differences among the inhabitants of the houses. I approach this by analyzing the distribution of archaeological features and artifacts (i.e. postholes, burials, ceramic and lithic artifacts). The results of this analysis demonstrate that the residential houses in the Wansan Society were not only places where the people lived and interacted with one another, but they were also places where the living intertwined with the dead through situating the deceased members around the residential houses. Furthermore, the correlation between the presence of possible ancestor symbols and the variations of artifacts among houses suggests that the social differentiation of the Wansan Society was likely related to the people's ability to claim their association with the ancestors.

1. Introduction

Recent applications of the house society concept to archaeological research have stimulated intense discussions on how houses might play a significant role in establishing, organizing, maintaining and reproducing certain social relations (see Beck, 2007a,b; Dueppen, 2012; Gillespie and Joyce, 2000; Hodder and Cessford, 2004). In addition, rich ethnographic accounts on the dynamic interactions between the materiality and the sociality of the house, offer archaeologists a more flexible framework to approach the study of houses and their inhabitants in prehistory (see Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995; Kirch and Green, 2001; Mckinnon, 1991; Sparkes and Howell, 2003; Waterson, 1990). These researchers show that employing "houses" as units of analysis can assist archaeologists to construct well-grounded interpretations.

The study of "houses" in Taiwanese archaeology is still in its infancy due to the rare presence of identifiable domestic architecture. However, informed by previous ethnographic works conducted in several Taiwanese Austronesian speaking societies, my colleague and I (Chiang and Liu, 2013) propose that the clustered arrangement of postholes at archaeological sites should be viewed as evidence of actual houses. Since the Austronesian-speaking peoples in Taiwan utilized perishable wooden posts to build the main house structure, the clear concentration of postholes in archaeological sites is recognized as the most plausible evidence of standing structures (Chijiiwa, 1960). As more areal excavations are being carried out in Taiwan, the spatial organization of these postholes, and their associated features and artifacts, constitute important clues for archaeologists to envision the existence of various house structures. More importantly, both linguistic and ethnographical research on Austronesian societies in Taiwan suggest that house structures are more than physical shelters for housing a group of people with the same biological roots. These structures can also represent basic social units recognized by local people. In addition, they appear to play an role in organizing the social, ritual, political, and economic life of these people (see Blust, 1980, 1995, 1996; Chen, 1995; Chiang, 2001; Chiang and Li, 1995; Tan, 2004; Yeh, 2002). This research demonstrates that the significance of the houses found in contemporary Austronesian-speaking societies is likely to have had a long tradition in Taiwan.

In order to understand how the Wansan Society (a Neolithic society in Taiwan) might have been organized, the following paper employs a house-centered approach to analyze archaeological data excavated from the Wansan site. By examining the distribution of archaeological features and artifacts, I illustrate the possible presence of several house groups. The associated artifacts and features from each assumed house group are also analyzed to understand the roles of building structures in the Wansan Society. In addition, the distribution of unusual objects, jade zoo-anthropomorphic objects, and their close association with burial contexts, suggests the presence of social differentiation in this Neolithic society. Drawing on the rich ethnographic cases from Taiwan, I propose that the jade zoo-anthropomorphic objects might have represented an ancestral symbol. The disparate ratio of "foreign" objects between house groups further suggests that the inhabitants who inherited ancestral symbols were also likely to control local resources. Inspired by the house society concept, I thus put forth a possible interpretation on how the house inhabitants were

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organized as a result of one's exclusive ability to control the ancestral symbol.

2. House society model

The theoretical framework that inspired my analysis and resulting interpretations is derived from the anthropological study of the so-called "house society." The concept of the "house society," which was first proposed by Lévi-Strauss (1982), is defined as:

> A corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods, and its titles down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity and, most often, of both. [1982:174]

In a house society, members of a social house unit are not only unified by the physical house buildings or specific material objects, but also by the need to ensure the continuous existence of the group by naming, maintaining, and manipulating these physical architectural structures or material objects. The concept of house societies specifically points to the role played by the physical buildings of a house in the formation of different social groups. In addition, particular types of material objects associated with the house can also be used to organize people into different social groups. When house members identify themselves as belonging to the same social house, they tend to express their identity by manipulating the material aspects associated with it. The idea of house societies explicitly links how social relations are created, organized and sustained with specific materiality, and it also emphasizes the importance of the long-term development of social house groups.

The concept of house society has been widely discussed and examined in both socio-cultural anthropology and archaeology (see Beck, 2007a,b; Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995; Gillespie and Joyce, 2000; Gonzalez-Ruibal, 2006; Sparkes and Howell, 2003). Among these studies, rich ethnographic cases have been recorded in various Austronesian-speaking societies that testify to the importance of houses in this area and suggest a possible continuous cultural tradition in these societies (Waterson, 1990). According to their linguistic and ethnological research, Patrick Kirch and Roger Green have further argued that the "house society" was likely an archaic "cultural pattern", commonly present in ancient Austronesian-speaking societies (Kirch and Green, 2001). More importantly, several ethnographic observations have noted the relationships between houses, material objects and social relations among these societies. These observations have not only enriched our understanding of contemporary societies, but they have also provided various means for archaeologists to further frame their archaeological interpretations on prehistoric societies.

The first observation is that houses in these societies are more than just architectural entities; they are also regarded as basic social, economic, ritual and political units (Carsten, 1995; Errington, 1987; Kirch and Green, 2001; Monaghan, 1996; Waterson, 1995). Aside from being demarcated by physical properties, members of houses form their sense of belonging through daily activities or so-called "shared/common substance" (i.e., cooking in the same hearth, co-eating, or sleeping in the same room) (Carsten, 1995; Waterson, 1995). Identities and allegiances of house members are not fixed from birth and can be changed throughout a life cycle of the house (Waterson, 1995:216; Gillespie, 2000b:1). Second, the continuity of social house groups and the ritual aspects of house structures are emphasized in these societies (Ellen, 1986; Fox, 1993; Lévi-Strauss, 1987; McKinnon, 2000; Sather, 1993). Based on ethnographic descriptions, the continuity of a social house unit can be maintained in a number of ways, including the transfer of the house, the title of the house, portable heirlooms, certain architectural posts or furniture within the house buildings, or through the practice of residential burials (Adams and Kusumawati, 2011; Bloch, 1995; Joyce, 2000; McKinnon, 1991, 2000; Waterson, 2000). This aspect of continuity grants the house structures a sort of sacred power and allows the houses to be viewed as living organisms. Therefore, the house buildings are also ritual sites where different kinds of rituals are performed within and for the houses. The emphasis on the continuity of this social unit and its close association with materiality has received the attention of archaeologists and has inspired various archaeological interpretations (Chiu, 2005; Gillespie, 2000a,b; Joyce, 2000; Kirch, 1997, 2000; Tringham, 2000). At the same time, the importance of the houses' continuous existence resonates with the diachronic perspective that archaeological research has typically focused on. The last observation is that certain features or portable objects belonging to the house functioned as a type of "inalienable possession" (Weiner, 1992), a tendency which was likely associated with the initiation and development of social differentiation in the society (Fox, 1993; McKinnon, 1991, 2000; Waterson, 1990).

The observations discussed above, which were drawn from ethnographic research and focus upon the relationships between the material world and social relations offer archaeologists a venue from which to interpret prehistoric social relations (Bloch, 1995; Bourdieu, 1973; Ellen, 1986; Cunningham, 1973; Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995; Carsten, 1995; Fox, 1993; Gibson, 1995; Waterson, 1995). These observed relationships between houses, material objects and social relations might be the social structures that are followed and reproduced by the house inhabitants' daily interaction with the physical structures. More importantly, these relationships can be observed in different types of societies, from the egalitarian Langkawi society to the highly hierarchical Medieval European societies (Carsten, 1995; Lévi-Strauss, 1982). Even though Lévi-Strauss originally proposed to view house society as a transitional social stage from kinship-based towards class society, these ethnographic studies do not imply that societies will experience the same developmental process. Instead, it has been argued that each instance of social transformation should be historically contingent and context dependent (Beck, 2007a:16).

3. House society as an interpretive model for exploring prehistoric Taiwanese societies

In Taiwan, the linguistic and ethnographic research illustrates that houses were likely to have been an important factor in organizing social groups and consolidating social identities in Taiwanese Austronesian-speaking societies (Blust, 1980, 1995; Chen, 1995; Chiang and Li, 1995; Chiang, 1999; Huang, 1999). More importantly, anthropologists have come to realize the feasibility of utilizing the concept of the house society to reexamine the social organization of these societies (Tan, 2004; Yeh, 2002). Since the concept of house society explicitly considers the process of how social identity and relations are formed and organized through objects or places (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995; Gillespie, 2000a,b), I argue that this concept can serve as an effective model to explore social relations of prehistoric Taiwanese societies, and can further our understanding of the relationship between mute artifacts and the dynamic social life of people in ancient times.

Most Taiwanese archaeological researchers have focused on establishing a cultural–historical framework based on artifact typologies. In such studies, archaeological features and artifacts