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Social Organization in Neolithic Taiwan

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A review of *Reconstructing Prehistoric Social Organization: A Case Study from the Wanshan Site, Neolithic Taiwan*, by Chih-hua Chiang.

Chih-hua Chiang's dissertation offers an inspiring piece that not only reconstructs a late Neolithic settlement, but also examines its social system. To that end, the author analyses how households were spatially structured within the village and how social differentiation worked at the inter-household level. This research analyzes two sets of primary archaeological records: the spatial distributions of postholes and stone tools from the Wanshan site (ca. 3,500-2,700 B.P.) in Northeast Taiwan. Chiang's work explicitly draws archaeological implications from the anthropological concept of "house society". Her work is therefore extremely meaningful not only to archaeological research in Taiwan but also to our understanding of prehistoric settlement pattern in general.

This dissertation consists of nine chapters and several appendixes. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the concept of house society originally proposed by Lévi-Strauss in 1975 and the refined models proposed by other scholars since 1990s. This house society approach has recently become one of the "hot-spot" theoretical frameworks in Austronesian studies, in particular Pacific archaeology [1]. Why is this concept particularly useful in archaeology? The answer rests in its potent archaeological implications that link empirical unearthed records and ethnographic observations. Based on this concept, Chiang for example argues that an archaeological site "was not only a place where people resided and interacted with other members on a daily basis, but also where the lives of the living members intertwined with the ancestors through situating of deceased members around the residential houses" (p. 1).

Chapter 3 reviews relevant archaeological, linguistic and ethnographical studies on house societies in Taiwanese Austronesian societies. The rich data collected since the Japanese Occupation period has largely provided researchers with a better understanding on the subtle ways in which indigenous societies are organized socially on the village level. However, as Chih-hua Chiang points out, most Taiwanese socio-cultural anthropologists discussing similar topics only focus on the synchronic aspect of the House but their works "lack any discussion about the role played by actual physical houses" (p.45). She is very likely correct in recognizing this long-term trend in cultural studies on Austronesian aboriginals. Thus, it is difficult to disagree with her argument that "this is where the archaeological research on Taiwanese Neolithic society can better contribute to our understanding of these Austronesian societies" (p.46). This aspect has indeed rarely, if ever, been studied in the prehistoric archaeology in Taiwan, making Chiang's dissertation an original and very important contribution to the field.

Chapter 4 then turns to a discussion of the stratigraphy, findings, radiocarbon dates, and surrounding environment of the chosen site. The environment also features large in the conclusion of Chiang's analysis of lithic resource exploitation and accessibility among various groups of houses. Chih-hua Chiang's work is particularly important considering that it contains material from the 1998 excavation of the Wanshan site which has not yet been officially published.

Chapter 5 is the center part of this dissertation, where the author formulates her hypotheses and a series of analytic methods to interpret the massive archaeological material from the Wanshan site. This may sounds routine in the framework contemporary Western archaeology, but in the East Asian archaeology it is still fairly novel to construct a theory-driven thesis in order to untangle intra-settlement social relations. The vital question addressed in this dissertation is how and why prehistoric social groups in the Wanshan site were different from each other. By asking this specific question, the author is able to break down the immense unearthed assemblage into sub-groups of data that are spatially meaningful. For example, Chiang sees jade earrings not only as "cultural prestige goods" but argues that the specific loci where objects of this kind were found indicate places where ancestor-related activities were performed. Therefore, "the possession of the zoo-anthropomorphic object separates certain houses from others" (p.199). In other words, space and location are meaningful. This is exactly where I found Chiang's dissertation to be particularly intriguing, since this notion has previously never been examined in the archaeology of Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Only recently have other scholars focused on prehistoric stone-cooking activities possibly comparable to "ancestral ritual", arguing that they were possibly associated with feasts during mortuary practices [2].

Chapter 6 turns to an actual analysis of unearthed features to identify dwellings and groups of houses. This is an ambitious task considering that Wanshan is a large, multi-component site on the top of a hill that was recorded only during a single-season salvage excavation. Chih-hua Chiang manages to recognize posthole clusters by analyzing field data with the help of the sophisticated Global Moran's I index. Once the posthole clusters are identified, she

identifies dwellings by the distribution of other archaeological material, such as walls and hearths. This innovative approach is a particularly important contribution to the archaeology of Taiwan where humid weather and the prevalence of salvage projects largely degrade the integrity of archaeological findings.

Following the identification of dwelling units in Chapter 6, Chapters 7 and 8 present a spatial analysis of artifact distributions focusing on their relations with houses (or groups of houses). Taken together Chiang's analyses of lithics, pottery and features suggest that there is indeed a difference between the various houses and groups of houses. It is argued that the differentiation between contemporary social groups may have a lot to do with the accessibility to their ancestors. The accessibility in turn reflects people's uneven capacity to exploit natural resources in the earthly lives.

In the conclusion of her dissertation, Chih-hua Chiang explores the house society model far beyond simply using it as a heuristic device by stating the following: The Houses that own zoo-anthropomorphic object have a privileged access to ancestors, a prestige that differentiates them from other houses that do not. It follows that one of the potent elements of social structure among the Wanshan people can be observed archaeologically in the variation of jade objects among the associated burials, which "testifies to the enduring nature of differences in rank within the society" (p. 200) although it did not necessarily indicate an concrete social hierarchy.

Inspired by Lévi-Strauss's notion of house society, Chih-hua Chiang offers a fresh and alternative image of the social life in a late Neolithic village. The conceptual toolkit and analytic methods in her theory-driven work provide a new way to understand ancient Austronesian-speaking peoples through the lens of the archaeological record.

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Primary Sources

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Notes

[1] Patric Kirch and Jennifer Kahn, "Advances in Polynesian prehistory: a review and assessment of the past decade (1993-2004)," *Journal of Archaeological Research*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2007), 191-238.

[2] Chin-yung Chao, I-Chang Liu, and Kwu-feng Chun, "On Upper Huakangshan Culture: A proposal" *Field Archaeology of Taiwan*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2013), 53-79.