

Preface

This book offers an anthropological analysis of how craft production changed in relation to the development of complex societies in northern China. It focuses on the production and use of food containers—pottery and bronze vessels—during the late prehistoric and early historic periods. A major theme is how production and use of prestige vessels changed in relation to increase in degree of social inequality.

The research and writing of this book took place intermittently over a period of several years. When I first outlined the book in 1994, I planned to offer a more limited and descriptive account of social change during the late prehistoric period. In considering the human desire to display status with prestige goods, my initial approach emphasized how the case of northern China was similar to other areas of the world. I began to realize that in order to adequately explain how and why craft production changed in ancient China, it was crucial to consider the belief systems that motivated production and use of food containers. Similarly, a striking characteristic of ancient China that I needed to include in the analysis was the preponderance of food containers, rather than other goods, that were buried with the deceased. I decided to investigate the social and ritual uses of food, beverages, and containers during more than one period of Chinese history. Some strong patterns could have emerged during the late prehistoric period.

It was especially important to assess both written records and archaeological remains from the Shang period. The earliest known system of writing in China emerged at this time, and one kind of medium for written communication was bronze vessels. In addition, a striking characteristic of the Shang political economy was the production of bronze food vessels. By including the Shang period, it would be possible to analyze changes in the

production and use of ceramic vessels, followed by the rise of bronze vessel production. It also would be possible to evaluate changes in the production and use of prestige goods after states clearly had developed in northern China.

Since early historical records from China focus almost exclusively on elites in highly stratified societies, it was important to explore relevant ethnographic and archaeological data from middle-range societies in other areas of the world. There are abundant cross-cultural data on feasting in residential settings and during mortuary rituals that helped me develop ideas about different possible pathways of change in production and use of food containers during the late prehistoric period.

I personally began to understand the importance of food and beverages in establishing and enhancing social relations in modern Shandong province after initiating a collaborative archaeological field project in 1995. During every year of our project it has been absolutely essential to host and attend banquets with local officials and colleagues. Another absolute requirement is to offer toasts pledging friendship, support, and commitment. Our most memorable banquets have included dishes such as fried scorpions, camels' hooves, and whole pig heads (Dawenkou style). Our team has enjoyed wonderful communal banquets, enhancing the integration of our group and relations with the officials who have made our work possible. At the same time, the banquets have included a complex seating order that displays the social rank of the participants in a practical way. It began to dawn on me that I was participating in a social process that probably emerged over four thousand years earlier.

Since there are few studies on the late prehistoric and early historic periods of China in English, I hope this book helps to make the extraordinary archaeological record of China more accessible. In addition, I hope my approach for investigating change in production and use of food containers is useful for readers who focus on other areas of the world.

ANNE P. UNDERHILL