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Abstract
This essay explores and critiques the creation of female origin myths in the archaeology of Neolithic China. The first example is the debate surrounding the gender relations in the Yangshao culture. The second half of the paper focuses on whether or not the possible goddess worship in the Hongshan culture can shed light on the understanding of women. It concludes by stating this kind of gynocentric archaeology does not provide an accurate picture of gender in Neolithic China, or propel the feminist agenda.

Keywords
gender, archaeology, Neolithic, China, Yangshao Culture, Hongshan Culture

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Shu Xin Chen

In the field of archaeology, gender has been a subject of constant debate. Essentially, the problem seems to center on the visibility, as well as the (mis)representation of gender in archaeological analyses, which oftentimes means the overrepresentation of men over women. For instance, as demonstrated in Lisbeth Skogstrand’s (2010) critical analysis of androcentric archaeology, the two case studies on ancient Scandinavian societies tend to have an overall focus on presumed male roles and activities, as well as interpretations from the standpoint of middle-age, middle-class and Western white men. Indeed, this kind of biased and imbalanced analyses of archaeological evidence not only fails to acknowledge women’s roles in the societies in question and hence provide a full picture of their social structures, but also tells very little about men themselves, since they are considered the norm within those societies.

What is equally problematic and uninformative is the gynocentric overestimation and over-interpretation of women’s roles in some other societies. In this regard, women are often portrayed as goddess worshippers that enjoyed higher status in ancient societies, which is exemplified by James Mellaart’s “Mother Goddess” theory regarding Çatalhöyük and Marija Gimbutas’ expansion on said theory (Meskell 1998). Similar to androcentric archaeology, the lack of analysis on men and the overall gender dynamics in the approach to archaeological evidence does not tell the true story of women’s roles in those contexts, or propel the feminist agenda. However, Cynthia Eller (2006:185) argues that despite all the problems with gynocentric myth, it still addresses “one of feminist movement’s most difficult questions: How can women attain real power when it seems we have never had it before?”

The archaeological studies of Neolithic China face similar problems as in Western academia, though the concerns may have been more associated with the dogmatic restrictions brought by national ideology and politics than feminist movements. For instance, the analyses on the Yangshao culture have changed through time along with the diminished influence of the Marxist paradigm on archaeology. Although recent archaeological studies have been fairly free from the influence of political rhetoric, archaeologists still choose a rather intuitive approach that has been biased by the contemporary social norms and values regarding the social structure and gender relations of the society in question, as is exemplified by the interpretations of the archaeological findings of the Hongshan culture. Consequently, this kind of myth-creating often masks the accurate gender dynamics of the past, as well as fails to propel the feminist agenda.

Women in the Yangshao Culture

First discovered by Swedish archaeologist and geologist Johan Gunnar Andersson in 1921, the Yangshao Culture, a Neolithic society from about 5000 to 3000 BC in Henan, Shaanxi and Shanxi, was traditionally considered the origin of Chinese civilization (Peterson and Shelach 2010:247). Hosted by the Institute of Archaeology in the Academia Sinica (IAAS), a full-scale excavation of Banpo village, the type site of the Yangshao culture, was undertaken from 1954 to 1957 (IAAS and Pan P’o Museum
It is located on a terrace by the Chan River, a branch of the Wei River, in the Shaanxi Province of northern China, which is covered with loess. According to the initial report of findings (IAAS and Pan P’o Museum 1953:9), the site was about 50,000 m² in size, and elongated from north to south. There were 46 houses at the site, most of which were concentrated in the south, surrounded by a moat. To the north of the residential and economic area was the cemetery. In the eastern section of the site were the kilns, whereas the western part was destroyed before the excavation (IAAS and Pan P’o Museum 1963:9).

The earlier archaeological analyses conducted on Banpo village and Yangshao culture as a whole have been heavily influenced by the Marxist paradigm that has been dominating the national ideological discourse ever since the communist government was established in 1949. As a result, archaeologists often tried to superimpose Marxist historical materialism and its unilineal evolutionary model onto their findings. In terms of Neolithic society, the Marxist doctrines maintain that it must have been a primitive egalitarian matrilineal society, which later developed into a stratified patriarchal one (Shelach 2004:13). Moreover, in the earlier years of the People’s Republic of China, archaeology had been exploited to serve current political agendas. Mao Zedong even specifically stated that archaeologists should “let the past serve the present” (qtd. in Chang 1981:167). It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the state was trying to create an egalitarian prehistoric China to divert public attention away from the possible social stigma of women and to legitimize their communist reign and goals.

One of the aspects of Yangshao culture that arguably supports the assumption of a matriarchal society is their agricultural practice. It was concluded that people at Banpo had already developed primitive agriculture and animal husbandry, which were mostly performed by women, though hunting and gathering were still necessary in supplementing the low production of food (IAAS and Pan P’o Museum 1963:225). Similarly, women were also in charge of pottery making, at least before the invention of the potter’s wheel (IAAS and Pan P’o Museum 1963:228). Based on these economic roles of women, archaeologists maintained that the Yangshao society was organized based on matrilocality and matrilineal pairing marriage (IAAS and Pan P’o Museum 1963:225). Since the nature of this kind of union was unstable, villages were actually communes that consisted of several households that shared the same kinship, where women were the primary caretakers of their children and the heads of their households, which in turn dictated their higher social status than men (IAAS and Pan P’o Museum 1963:225).

Nevertheless, it was the burial sites uncovered in Banpo village that solidified archaeologists’ argument regarding women’s privileges in the Yangshao culture. First, those multi-burials, which were laid out according to sex, served as evidence of matrilineal society because they demonstrated the preferential treatments. Specifically, according to the report, women could be buried with their children while men could not (IAAS and Pan P’o Museum 1963:226). Similarly, the discovery of a young girl’s grave with a substantial amount of burial goods that indicated she might have been the daughter of a clan leader seemingly supported this hypothesis as well (IAAS and Pan P’o Museum 1963:226), even though the ownership of her burial goods were unclear.
and could also suggest early social stratification. In addition, spouses were not buried together, because they did not share the same bloodline, which, according to the initial archaeological analysis, was also seen as proof for the existence of matrilineal society (IAAS and Pan P’o Museum 1963:226).

This early dogmatic analysis of Banpo and the Yangshao culture was later severely criticized, because the archaeological evidence was not used for scientific hypothesis testing, but rather tailored to fit in the Marxist predisposition. In his analysis on the burial goods found in the Banpo cemetery, Jiao Tianlong (2001:54) mildly suggests that perhaps the Yangshao society was a more egalitarian and bilineal one, instead of one that favored women substantially. Nevertheless, as early as in 1962, a year prior to the publication of the Banpo archaeological report, Xu Shunzhang already concluded that Yangshao belonged to the patriarchal stage (Shelach 2004:16). Recent osteological analysis of the collective graves even indicates that the sex ratios in those graves were heavily biased against females, suggesting perhaps infanticide or different mortuary treatments against them (Gao and Lee 1993:295). The interments were mostly homogeneous in the individual graves. It is equally possible that Banpo society was not only patrilineal, but also patrilocal (Gao and Lee 1993:289-295). Liu Li (2004:135) even further argued that females “were perhaps of little importance economically and politically [within] their natal kin communities”.

Although the debate surrounding the Banpo village and the Yangshao culture is not so much a feminist gesture than an ideological readjustment reflecting the similar shift in the national political rhetoric, it is still a telling example of the misleading effect of recreating a matrilineal and matrilocal society based on ambiguous evidence. It is especially ironic, given the fact that even during the formation years of the communist party, female cadres’ positions have been dependent on their husbands’ (Zarrow 2005:229). Considering the state’s attention was focused on class struggle and proletarian revolution around the time when the Banpo report was published, one can argue there were ulterior motives behind this kind of archaeology of desire, where by creating a so-called egalitarian and matrilineal society in the ancient past, it supports either the Weberian notion of structured inequality. That is, the Yangshao culture serves as a template of change to delegitimize the contemporary patriarchal social mores, or Eric Hobsbawm’s idea that “[c]ontemporary desires are appeased by the creation and maintenance of myths about the past” (Meskell 1998:62). That is, the creation of Yangshao myths could either legitimize the contemporary communist agenda, or appease feminist demands and turn the public’s attention towards class struggle.

**Goddesses in the Hongshan Culture**

Dated back from about 4,500 to approximately 2,500 BC, the Hongshan culture was a late Neolithic society located in the western Liao River and Daling River regions in northern China (Jiao 2001:57; Nelson 2002:74). Similar to the Yangshao culture, it is also considered to be part of the “root” of Chinese civilization, since some of its features were inherited in the later dynastic period (Nelson 2002:78). Evidence suggesting intensive agriculture, pottery manufacture, and possible primitive metallurgy has been found (Nelson 2002:76-77). The fine craftsmanship of the
artifacts uncovered from burial sites also indicates social stratification in which the elites regulated the crafts and possibly the associated rituals to maintain their social status (Nelson 2002:77). The two Hongshan type sites were Dongshanzui and Niuheliang, both being ceremonial centres, and merely 25 kilometres apart (Nelson 2002:74), where monumental architectures and religious icons were found (Jiao 2001:58; Peterson et al. 2010:5756). However, any kind of elaborate residence or defensive architecture is still virtually unknown (Peterson et al. 2010:5756).

A recent survey suggests that the Dongshanzui site and its surrounding region once had an elevated population during the Hongshan period (Peterson et al. 2010:5760). Yet, the site is mostly known for its stone altars and walls that were uncovered by local archaeologists in the early 1980s (Jiao 2001:58). Built roughly along a south-north axis and formed in respectively round, rectangular and multi-circular shapes, the three altars were excavated along with clay female figurines and fragments of life-sized female icons (Jiao 2001:58). The smaller female figurines appear to be nude, one of which is pregnant, while some of the medium-sized ones depict seated women (Nelson 2002:75), and who could have been some sort of authoritative figures. Sarah Milledge Nelson (2002:75) suggests that in contrast to the Niuheliang site, Dongshanzui seems to emphasize life, judging from the shapes representing heaven found on the altars and the female figurines.

Notwithstanding, the most noteworthy type site, Niuheliang, is famous for its burials and temples. It covers an area of at least 80 square kilometres (Nelson 2002:75). From 1983 to 1985, ten ritual sites and thirteen groups of stone-mounded tombs were identified (Jiao 2001:58; Nelson 2002:75). Within those burials, one of which appeared to belong to someone of high status, large quantities of painted pots and jade ornaments were uncovered (Jiao 2001:58; Nelson 2002:75), though there is no indication of any human remains. Yet, it is the finding of the “goddess temple” that is truly extraordinary. An irregular structure with several painted rooms, the temple measures 18.4-by-6.9 metres (Jiao 2001:58). A number of fragmented female statues of various sizes and appearances were also found, some of which were even two or three times larger than life (Jiao 2001:59). Additionally, the fragments of a smiling human head with feminine facial features and inset jade eyes were discovered on the floor of the building (Jiao 2001:59; Nelson 2002:76). Both the jades and the female statues display animalistic traits, exemplified by the pig’s lips found on items of both categories (Jiao 2001:59; Nelson 2002:75). They were also thought to be made locally, especially the statues, since preservation through a long trip would have been extremely difficult (Nelson 2002:78).

Understandably, the findings from both Dongshanzui and Niuheliang can lead to the conclusion that the Hongshan culture was a society with a pantheon of goddesses. Many scholars have argued those female figurines represent Chinese “Venuses” that have been significant in the formation of Chinese civilization (Jiao 2001:59). Some propose that the figurines were representations of a fertility and agriculture goddess, while others, such as Zhang Zhongpei and even Nelson herself, go so far to suggest that this goddess worship may have been associated with a matriarchal social system (Jiao 2001:59). There are also scholars who maintain that this “Earth Mother” may have been the...
legendary ancestor of the Hongshan people, and the temple was actually a shrine dedicated to this ancestor (Jiao 2001:59). However, whether it was goddess or ancestor worship, it is clear that none of these assumptions are actually able to shed light on the gender relations or ideology in the Hongshan culture. They only bring more questions than answers. Incidentally, both Jiao and Nelson concede that neither the burial goods nor the female icons provide much information regarding their meanings, and hence the overall ideology of Hongshan society (Jiao 2001:59; Nelson 2002:78).

It is entirely possible and plausible that women played an essential role in Hongshan society, judging from the findings at both Dongshanzi and Niuheliang. Moreover, it is also reasonable to argue that those female figurines were the Hongshan people’s depiction of their deities. However, one must be cautioned by the renewed interpretation of the “Venus” figurines from Upper Paleolithic Europe, where what used to be considered representations of goddesses or sex objects is now interpreted to be a reflection of the growing sense of individual among women at this time (McCoid and McDermott 1996). The absence of men in those archaeological analyses is also troubling. As a result, it is even more problematic to draw conclusions regarding the nature of gender relations or ideology based on what little information the material culture has provided, let alone to assume that the Hongshan society was a matriarchy. This kind of assumptions not only lacks proofs, but also hinders future interpretations if it becomes the orthodoxy.

Discussion and Conclusion

In an attempt to make gender relations and each gender visible in the archaeological record, gender archaeology in China has always been both challenging and illuminating. Especially in the case of prehistoric archaeology, without the aids of written records, it is even more difficult to unravel the true nature of gender relations and ideology by material culture alone. At the same time, the archaeology itself reflects the theoretical frameworks and ideology of the archaeologists. In the case of the Yangshao culture, it is evident that the dependence upon the Marxist paradigm has led to the problematic conclusions of Yangshao being a matrilineal and matrilocal society. Although dissimilar, an intuitive approach has resulted in varied hypotheses regarding the Hongshan culture, one of which being the same assumption of matriarchy. Although this kind of gynocentric archaeology does provide insight on gender and power relations, as well as “the general correlation between the presence of female origin myths and high status of women” (Bacus 2007:44), the absence of men in the picture creates an incomplete reconstruction of the past. In the end, the one thing that gender-biased archaeology does prove is that gender, even under a prehistoric context, is far more complex than previously believed.

Future archaeological research on gender in prehistoric China can take several new directions. The dogmatic Marxist paradigm can very well provide testable hypotheses in this regard. It is also crucial to not treat the notion of gender as static, even in prehistoric times. Thus, Gideon Shelach (2004:24) proposes “research that focuses on the development and change of gender relations while retaining the modern notion of multilinear trajectories and taking advantage of advanced methods of data recovery and analysis.” Another direction is to look beyond mortuary practices and monumental architecture and rediscover
gender elsewhere. Albeit dogmatic and crude, the early analysis of gender relations in the Yangshao culture based on its agricultural practice proves to be a useful example. All in all, in order to understand the roles of women and gender relations in prehistoric cultures, more data, especially that regarding men, needs to be collected and analyzed, so as to reconstruct a more truthful meaning of gender in the past, the present and the future.

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