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Notes on Contributors

CHEN Honghai 陈洪海 is a professor of archaeology and president of the School of Cultural Heritage at Northwestern University, Xi’an city, Shaanxi province, China. His research focuses on late Neolithic and early Bronze Age sites in the upper Yellow river valley area of Qinghai and Gansu provinces.

CHEN Xingcan 陈星灿 is senior fellow and deputy director of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, and professor, department of archaeology, Graduate School, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. His extensive research on the Neolithic and early Bronze in the central Yellow river valley includes issues such as state formation and analysis of settlements.

CUI Qilong 崔启龙 is a MA student specializing in ancient technologies in the department of the archaeology and history of technology, University of Science and Technology, Hefei city, Anhui province, China.

Geoffrey CUNNAR 柯杰夫 was awarded his PhD from Yale University and specializes in lithic technology. He has decades of field experience in the Rizhao area of Shandong province, Jiangxi province, and the western United States with Western Cultural Resource Management and other organizations.

FANG Hui 方辉 is dean of the Institute for Cultural Heritage, professor in the department of archaeology, School of History and Culture, Shandong University, China, and director of the Shandong University Museum in Jinan city. He specializes in the early Bronze Age, regional survey, early textual data, and jade technology, and he has directed several fieldwork projects in Shandong province.

Rowan FLAD 傅蘿文 is a professor of archaeology in the department of anthropology at Harvard University. His research is currently focused on the emergence and development of complex societies, production processes, ritual, and the roles of animals in early societies, particularly in the Sichuan basin and the Three Gorges area.

HE Nu 何驽 is a research professor at the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. His research focuses on the origins of Chinese civilization,
the organization of settlements, and cognitive archaeology. He has directed fieldwork at the Taosi site in Shanxi province since 2001.

**HWANG Ming-chorng** 黄銘崇 is a researcher at the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan.

**JIANG Leping** 蒋乐平 is a research professor at the Zhejiang Province Institute of Archaeology in Hangzhou city, Zhejiang province, China. He specializes in the early Neolithic cultures of Zhejiang and has directed numerous excavations.

**Tianlong JIAO** 焦天龙 is chair of the department of anthropology at the Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai‘i. He specializes in archaeology of the prehistoric and historic periods of southeast China and adjacent areas in the Pacific. He has directed several fieldwork projects in China, including Fujian and Hunan provinces.

**Zhichun JING** 荆志淳 is Canada Research Chair in Pacific Asia Archaeology in the department of anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. His primary areas of interest include Shang civilization, early urbanization, geoarchaeology, and archaeometry. He has conducted fieldwork at Anyang and Shangqiu in Henan province, China.

**LI Kuang-ti** 李匡悌 is an associate research fellow at the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan. His research interests mainly focus on prehistoric settlement and subsistence patterns in Taiwan and surrounding areas using isotopic and zooarchaeological approaches. He is also interested in environmental archaeology and the relationship between diet and the strategy of food-resources procurement.

**LI Xinwei** 李新伟 is a professor at the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China. He obtained his doctorate from the archaeology program at La Trobe University, Australia and is currently director of the Zhuding-yuan project focusing the development of Miaodigou culture societies in western Henan province.

**LI Yung-ti** 李永迪 is a researcher at the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan. His research has focused on late Shang craft specialization and economic organization.

**Li LIU** 刘莉 is a professor in the department of East Asian languages and cultures at Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA. Her research interests include state formation, settlement patterns, zooarchaeology, craft specialization, starch grain analysis, and zooarchaeology, and she has conducted extensive fieldwork in the Yi–Luo area of Henan province.

**LU Xueming** 吕学明 is a professor of archaeology in the school of history at Renmin University, Beijing. His research interests include Neolithic and Bronze Age northeast
China, the study of social complexity, regional settlement survey, and ceramics analysis. He has helped direct excavations at the Hongshan period ceremonial center of Niuheliang since 1993.

LUAN Fengshi is a professor in the department of archaeology in the Institute for Cultural Heritage, School of History and Culture, Shandong University, Jinan city, China. He has directed excavations at numerous late Neolithic settlements in Shandong province and has published extensively about late Neolithic social organization.

Robert E. MUROWCHICK teaches East and Southeast Asian archaeology in the department of archaeology at Boston University and is director of the International Center for East Asian Archaeology and Cultural History (ICEAACH). His primary research interests include the development of early Bronze Age societies in China (fieldwork at Shangqiu, Henan province), the development of nonferrous metallurgy, and international cultural heritage management.

PEI Anping is a professor at Nanjing Normal University in the Institute of History and Culture, Nanjing city, Jiangsu province, China. His excavations in the central Yangzi river area have focused on early rice-farming villages.

Christian E. PETERSON is assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. His research interests include Neolithic north and northeast China, the comparative study of early complex societies (“chiefdoms”), regional settlement patterns, household archaeology, and quantitative methods.

QIN Ling is associate professor of Neolithic archaeology and archaeobotany at the School of Archaeology and Museology, Peking University, China. She has done extensive fieldwork and co-directed excavation projects in Zhejiang, Shandong, and Henan.

George RAPP is Regents Professor Emeritus of Geoarchaeology at the University of Minnesota. He has conducted geoarchaeological investigations in several world areas, including Anyang and Shangqiu in Henan province.

Gideon SHELACH is Louis Freiberg Professor of East Asian Studies at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel. He is the current chair of the Louis Freiberg Center for East Asian Studies at Hebrew University and he has been engaged in archaeological research in the Chifeng area of northeast China since 1994.

James STOLTMAN is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research interests include petrographic ceramic thin-section analysis and environmental archaeology in both China and North America.

SUN Bo is a researcher and deputy director at the Shandong Provincial Institute of Archaeology in Jinan city, China, specializing in the Neolithic period in Shandong.
SUN Guoping 孙国平 is a research professor at the Zhejiang Provincial Institute of Archaeology in Hangzhou city, China. He has directed several excavations in the lower Yangzi river valley, focusing on subsistence economies.

SUN Hua 孙华 is a professor in the department of archaeology and museology at Peking University, China, specializing in Neolithic and early Bronze Age cultures of southwestern China.

TANG Jigen 唐际根 is a research fellow at the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. He has directed excavations at Yinxu (Anyang) since 1994. His research interests include Shang archaeology, mortuary analysis, public archaeology, and cultural heritage management.

TENG Mingyu 滕铭予 is a professor at the Center for Frontier Archaeology at Jilin University, Changchun city, Jilin province, China. Her research addresses the formation and development of the Qin state in northwest China, the application of GIS methods in archaeology, and environmental archaeology.

Anne P. UNDERHILL 文德安 is a professor of anthropology at Yale University and curator at Yale’s Peabody Museum; her collaborative research team since 1995 with Shandong University has focused on late Neolithic and early Bronze Age sites in southeastern Shandong province. Her other research interests include craft specialization and ceramic ethnoarchaeology.

WANG Fen 王芬 is an associate professor in the department of archaeology, School of History and Culture, Shandong University, Jinan city, China, specializing in the Neolithic period of the Haidai (eastern seaboard) area of China, pottery analysis, and early Neolithic settlements.

WANG Lixin 王立新 is research director of the Center for Frontier Archaeology at Jilin University, Changchun city, Jilin province, China. His extensive research has focused on changes in subsistence and settlement from the late Neolithic to the early Bronze Age in northeast China.

XU Hong 许宏 is a professor and director of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou archaeological research department at the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. He also is director of the Erlitou archaeological research team.

YUAN Guangkuo 袁广阔 is a professor of archaeology and chair of the archaeology department at Capital Normal University in Beijing, China. His research focuses on state formation and the origins of Chinese civilization. He has directed several excavations at Neolithic and early Bronze Age sites in northern China.

ZHAI Shaodong 翟少冬 obtained her PhD from LaTrobe University in Australia and is currently a researcher at the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. She specializes in lithic production, political economy, and early urbanism.
ZHANG Chi 张弛 is a professor in the department of archaeology and museology at Peking University, China, specializing in Neolithic cultures of the middle Yangzi river area and southeast China.

ZHANG Juzhong 张居中 is a professor of archaeology in the University of Science and Technology in Hefei city, Anhui province, China, and curator at the University Museum. His numerous publications focus on topics regarding early Neolithic cultures and environmental archaeology.

ZHAO Chunqing 赵春青 is a research professor at the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. He specializes in the archaeology of the Neolithic period and early Bronze Age in Henan province and adjacent areas in northern China.

ZHU Yanping 朱延平 is a research professor at the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. He has conducted fieldwork in several regions of northern China and specializes in the early Neolithic period.
Notes on Translators and Other Assistants

**Translators**

**Jade d’ALPOIM GUEDES** 瑏玉 (Chapters 8 and 19) is a doctoral student and paleoethnobotanist in the department of anthropology, Harvard University, focusing on southwest China.

**Katherine BRUNSON** 博凯龄 (Chapter 13) is a doctoral student in the department of anthropology, University of California-Los Angeles, focusing on zooarchaeology and the late Neolithic period.

**Richard EHRICH** 李查得 (Chapter 13) holds an MA in prehistoric archaeology and sinology from the Free University of Berlin, Germany, and then worked at the Eurasian department of the German Archaeological Institute. His projected doctoral research at the University of California-Los Angeles focuses on the prehistory of Sichuan.

**FANG Kunyang** 方堃杨 (Chapter 23) is currently finishing her MA in archaeological studies at Yale University.

**GUO Mingjian** 郭明建 (Chapter 20) is an archaeologist at the National Museum of China in Beijing, specializing in the Neolithic period.

**GUO Yanlong** 郭彦龙 (Chapter 25) is a doctoral student in the department of art history, visual art, and theory, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, focusing on the Han dynasty.

**Anke HEIN** 安可 (Chapters 6 and 25) is studying for a PhD at the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California-Los Angeles, focusing on cultural contact, ethnic identity, and human–environment interaction in southwest China.

**LANG Jianfeng** 朗剑锋 (Chapter 15) is an assistant professor in the department of archaeology, School of History and Culture, Shandong University, China, specializing in the early Bronze Age.
LIN Hu 林鹄 (Chapter 26) is an assistant professor in the department of history, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, specializing in the archaeology of the medieval period nomadic empires of China.

LIU Siran 刘思然 (Chapter 16) is a doctoral student in the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, specializing in archaeometallurgy.

Pauline SEBILLAUD 史宝琳 (Chapter 5) is a PhD candidate in Chinese archaeology, studying in cooperation with the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE) in Paris and Jilin University in Changchun, China, focusing on late Neolithic to early Bronze Age settlement patterns and architectural techniques.

YANG Qian 楊謙 (Chapter 21) is a doctoral student at Shandong University focusing on the early Bronze Age.

YEN Ling-Da 閻玲達 (Chapter 10) is a doctoral student in the department of anthropology, University of Hawai‘i, focusing on the archaeology and zooarchaeology of southeastern China and Taiwan.

Meng YING 应萌 (Chapter 24) is an archaeologist with Golder Associates Ltd. in British Columbia, specializing in cultural resource management as well as the early Bronze Age of China.

ZHANG Wenjie 张闻捷 (Chapter 12) is an assistant professor at Xiamen University, Fujian province, China, focusing on bronze ritual vessels from the Zhou period.

ZHANG Ying 张颖 (Chapter 27) is a doctoral student in archaeology at University College London, specializing in zooarchaeology.

ZHANG Yijie 庄奕杰 (Chapter 9) gained a PhD from Cambridge University, UK and has begun a postdoctoral fellowship at Oxford University focusing on geoscience and analysis of early Neolithic landscapes.

OTHER ASSISTANTS

CHEN Xuexiang 陈雪香 is an associate professor in the department of archaeology, School of History and Culture, Shandong University, China, specializing in paleoethnobotany.

Andrea FEUER 白小安, a graduate of Yale, plans to use her Chinese language skills as she pursues a career in law. Her passion for Chinese culture stems from being raised in Shanghai.

HUI Xiping 惠夕平 is an assistant professor in the department of archaeology, School of History, Zhengzhou University, China, specializing in the late Neolithic period and early Bronze Age.
LIN Minghao 林明昊 is a doctoral student in the department of archaeology, Cambridge University, UK, focusing on zooarchaeology.

Jason NESBITT specializes in the archaeology of Peru and is an assistant professor in the department of anthropology, Tulane University, New Orleans.

SONG Yanbo 宋艳波 is an assistant professor in the department of archaeology, School of History and Culture, Shandong University, China, specializing in zooarchaeology.

Steve VICTOR is an avocational archaeologist who lives in New Haven, CT, and has field experience in several areas of the world.

WANG Jinping 王锦萍 is a Mellon postdoctoral teaching fellow at the department of East Asian languages and civilizations, University of Pennsylvania.

WANG Shifeng 王世峰 grew up in Liangchengzhen, Shandong province, China, where he assisted in many aspects (especially mapping and lithics analysis with Geoffrey Cunnar) of the collaborative excavation project directed by Shandong University.

Daniela WOLIN 李丹妮 is a doctoral student in the anthropology department at Yale University, focusing on the archaeology of China, with special interests in bioarchaeology and the early Bronze Age.

Andrew WOMACK 吴浩森 is a doctoral student in the anthropology department at Yale University, focusing on the archaeology of China with special interests in ceramic production and central China.

Ingrid YEUNG 杨悦庭 is a doctoral student in the history of art department at Yale University, specializing in Bronze Age China.
Current Issues in Chinese Archaeology
There are two main goals of this book. One goal is to reveal the diverse methodological and theoretical approaches to understanding prehistoric and early historic era societies that characterize current research efforts in Chinese archaeology. The authors discuss geographical areas that later became part of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) (Figure 1.1). They are major scholars in the field of Chinese archaeology from diverse areas of the globe, including members of collaborative Sino-foreign research teams. The important contributions of some of the authors from mainland China are published in English for the first time. Chinese archaeology is a thriving field with scholars continuing to develop diverse methods of fieldwork and interpretation. The chapters demonstrate a variety of thoughtful approaches to investigating the past. No single theoretical or methodological approach characterizes current research about ancient China.

The second major goal is to provide English readers with new data about ancient China that are significant for understanding regional variation in social, economic, and political organization over time. The chapters offer diverse interpretations about the organization of individual settlements and regions, involving a range from small-scale, sedentary societies, to polities including several settlements. I believe that the
Figure 1.1 Modern political areas and geographic areas (shaded) referred to in consecutive sections of this book. (Figure by Pauline Sebillaud and Andrew Womack.)

archaeological record of East Asia is extremely important for global comparative research on the development and nature of ancient complex societies. The chapters in this book show that it is essential to consider the archaeological record for many regions of China, not just the Central Plain area of the Yellow river valley where the earliest undisputed states and writing systems developed. Furthermore, the chapters reveal significant regional diversity in the trajectories of change and in the nature of the societies that developed. After explaining my decisions about the subject matter and organization of the book, I offer some suggestions for future avenues of research on different kinds of social relations in the past.

The chapters in this book are organized by sections centered on major geographic areas rather than by groupings using the terms “Neolithic period” and “early Bronze Age” as in most other publications about Chinese archaeology. These terms are overly simplistic as chronological indicators, since in some areas such as the Southeast, relatively small-scale societies flourished for millennia after the emergence of early states and the onset of bronze production (tools, ornaments, and/or vessels) further north (Figure 1.2). These terms also mask significant regional variation with respect to social, economic, and political organization over time, often leading to assumptions about homogeneity in social, political, and economic organization.