

Rethinking ritual and the excavation of archaeological deposits at Shang sites

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Abstract

Studies on ritual in the early Chinese Bronze Age have focused primarily on practices surrounding divination, feasting, and sacrifice. These traditions are supported historically with divination inscriptions that mention offerings of animals and humans to ancestors and otherworldly beings; they are supported archaeologically with the divination bones themselves, material remains of feasting, and pit deposits known as “sacrificial pits” that contain remains of animal and human bodies. Mortuary ritual is another topic of inquiry as burials are often well preserved at archaeological sites. In this paper, I analyze archaeological materials linked with these rituals in their contexts of deposition at the early Bronze Age site of Yanshi Shangcheng. I argue that the materials indicate a linkage or blending of ritual and daily life at Yanshi. “Ritual”, as a separate concept, likely did not exist in this historic context. The dichotomy between “ritual” and “mundane” (daily life), often upheld in archaeological practice through the use of classification conventions that juxtapose domestic refuse with ritual deposits, is problematic. It leads to selective recording (such as privileging of more interesting ritual remains and not recording mundane remains in as much detail), difficulties of interpretation, and confirmation bias.

Ritual in early China

Ritual is a prominent theme in the archaeology and history of the Bronze Age and the later Neolithic period in China, especially as it relates to elite power. K.C. Chang, for example, argues that Bronze Age elites of northern China acquired and maintained their political power through divination and communication with the ancestors and through their ability to acquire raw materials to cast bronze ritual vessels, seen as essential in elite ancestor ritual (Chang 1983, 1986). In other writings, Chang elaborates on a shaman-king hypothesis (Chang 1993, 1994), arguing that the Shang king was a shaman who conducted ritual sacrifice and divination in order to secure support of the ancestors. In a study of the relationship between divination and power

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in early China, Flad emphasizes state-based authority and elaboration of divination practices during the Shang (2008, 403–404). Liu (1996) discusses the relationship between ancestor worship and social stratification in the Late Neolithic, suggesting that high status in life led to increased remembrance by descendants in death. And I have proposed that artisans at the Erligang site of Yanshi Shangcheng, located in Yanshi city in Henan province, were able to increase their social standing through ritual practices involving feasting, sacrifice, and divination (Reinhart 2015a).

Archaeological approaches to ritual tend to look at evidence of ritual or cult practices as “special” and distinct from everyday practices. In cultural anthropology, ritual is often defined as programmatic. Renato Rosaldo has critiqued this conventional definition of ritual where “it more nearly resembles a recipe, a fixed program, or a book of etiquette than an open ended human process” (Rosaldo 1993, 172). In Chinese archaeological practice, there is typically a distinction between “ash pits” and ritual deposits, often called “sacrificial pits”. However, this informal classification scheme belies the difficulty that often excavators often have in distinguishing traces of ritual from those of daily life; the distinction is often not clear-cut.

At the site of Yanshi, for example, excavators are sometimes greatly challenged to identify whether deposits reflect ritual or not. In the late 1990s, excavators digging in the location of the walled palace at Yanshi discovered a series of depositional pits. These pits contained large quantities of pottery and animal bones and initial interpretations were of an elite refuse dump and storage area. The location was called *Dahuigou* 大灰沟 or “great ash trench” (Henan Second Archaeological Team 2000), which relates to the term for smaller ash-pits or ash-trenches that are often interpreted as remains of daily life. By the early 2000s, however, the features were reinterpreted as a network of ritual deposits (Institute of Archaeology 2002). Similar examples of this type of reinterpretation and challenges to interpretation have occurred at Yanshi, such as difficulty with ambiguous features, revisions of feature identification over time, lack of correspondence between co-authors of report sections, and in uncertain feature identifications. This type of interpretive difficulty is also found in the archaeology of other regions of the world as well (e.g. Hamerow 2006; Morris & Jervis 2011).

If people living in past historic contexts did not distinguish between “ritual” and “daily life” the way we do or tend to in archaeological classification (whether explicitly stated or not), this poses a potential problem for interpretation. The dichotomy also potentially leads to preferential treatment of “special” deposits over more mundane others, both of which are equally valuable for understanding life in the past. In this paper, I will question the “ritual” v. “daily life” dichotomy by evaluating materials found in various archaeological deposits around the domestic and cemetery spaces of a potters’ neighborhood at Yanshi.

Ritual and daily life at Yanshi Shangcheng

I will present archaeological materials and features recovered from the site of Yanshi Shangcheng, an important Erligang polity settlement of the middle Yellow River Valley, dating from around 1600 BCE to around 1365 BCE. Yanshi is thought to represent a major settlement of the Erligang polity, though some consider it a Shang capital site (Liu & Chen 2012, 278). The Erligang polity is considered hierarchical, with settlement patterns that display tiered settlement hierarchy (Liu & Chen 2012; Yuan 2013). The layout of Yanshi consisted of two substantial pounded-earth walls, one a major wall with footprint shaped like a cleaver, and the one a minor inner rectangular wall. Within the settlement was a walled palace compound, walled storage facilities, and neighborhoods dedicated to craft production.

The Yanshi occupation is divided by excavators into three phases, the dates of which are based on radiocarbon data, rounded for convenience (Henan Second Archaeological Team 2000, 11; Wang 1999, 30–31; Xia Shang Zhou Chronology Team 2000). During the first phase (c. 1600–1500 BC), the general plan of Yanshi was completed, including the minor rectangular wall and palace complex. During the second phase (c. 1500–1400 BC), the second major wall was built. In the third phase (c. 1400–1365 BC), the settlement declined after a brief period of flourishing. Social stratification at Yanshi is inferred from contrast in architecture between the palace and outer areas, considered by excavators to be a lower status area (Wang 1999, 31). This includes a potters' area that I will focus on. Archaeological materials in the potters' area suggest that ritual practices, as traditionally defined (divination, sacrifice, feasting, mortuary practices) occurred in domestic areas, interwoven with the activities of daily life. The archaeological materials that I will present come from the main types of archaeological deposits found at early Bronze Age sites: ditches, pits, wells, and graves. The subterranean deposition of objects and bodies was an important practice in the early Bronze Age of northern China, though this practice has received little scholarly attention.

Ditches and wells

Chinese archaeologists classify typical depositional ditches and pits as “ash ditches” and “ash pits” because of the presence of plant ash, burnt earth, and charcoal in the features. Several ditch features were excavated in the Yanshi potters' area. One of the larger ditches, called HG2, was composed of domestic material and remnants of domestic activities such as potsherds, ashy soil, charcoal, and small artifacts (Institute of Archaeology 2013, 493–494). The fill of HG2 was divided into 6 non-uniform layers that ranged in thickness from 10 cm to 80 cm. Each layer was comprised of distinctive soil color and texture; and the composition of the lower layers differed from those above. Variation in the layering may reflect different depositional events or indicate a varied depositional history.

While much of the material excavated in HG2 is typical of refuse as traditionally defined, there are other signs of feasting and divination. In the bottom two layers, excavators recovered animal bones, teeth, and horn; charcoal; a divination bone; and potsherds (several pots were able to be reconstructed from the fragments). These materials may be indicative of deposition following a feast, which is expected in this historic context as divination is connected with feasting and sacrifice (Reinhart 2015a). It is possible that material was dumped directly into the ditch (i.e. after a feast), that material was collected and dumped after first being deposited elsewhere, such as a midden, or that material accumulated gradually over time. More detailed reporting and contextual information than typically reported and recorded for this feature type is necessary to understand the activities that led up to deposition.

Water wells also functioned as a depositional site in the potters' area at Yanshi. They were presumably not excavated in the past for the purpose of deposition, but were later repurposed, perhaps after they ceased to function as wells. The composition of well features is similar to that of ditches. They typically contain pottery, ashy soil, sometimes fragmented bone, and small daily items. Many of the objects found in wells appear to have been damaged, such as broken arrowheads and sickles; however, some appear to be functional, such as bone hairpins. Was everything deposited into wells (like the other features) simply "trash"? Does the seemingly domestic material deposited signify that well deposition was purely functional? Or were there other layers of meaning? Throwing pennies into a wishing well or metallic votive offerings placed in watery places in the western European Bronze Age (Bradley 1988) are two examples of deposition of objects to fulfill purposes other than simply throwing refuse "out" or "away".

The Yanshi site report describes an unusual deposit in well H2: the skeleton of an older man in ashy gray fill mixed with potsherds. The skeleton was positioned on its side with right arm under the head. Since no contextual or stratigraphic information is provided, it is difficult to assess whether this was intentional burial or what the significance of the pottery deposited along with the body might have been, whether it was refuse, whether it was purposefully broken, whether it was deposited in a structured way, or simply as part of fill surrounding the body. Again, contextual information and detailed reporting is crucial to understanding the activities that led to the deposition and would help elucidate why this older man not given a proper burial (I will return to the topic of proper burial below)?

Pits

Pits are one of the most common archaeological features at Erligang and Shang sites. 199 pits were reported for the Yanshi potters' area of Area IV, for example (Institute of Archaeology 2013, 774–802). "Ash pits", as they are called, are often identified as domestic refuse pits (e.g. Lee & Bestel 2007, 58). The composition of typical pits is similar to that of ditch and well deposits: plant ash, charcoal, potsherds, and small objects reflecting daily activities such as spindle whorls, awls, knives, axes, spades, sickles, arrowheads, hair pins, and divination bones.

The identification of ash pits as refuse deposits is a reasonable assessment as many of the small artifacts recovered from these contexts appear to be the end of their use-life (broken pottery and broken domestic tools), ashy soil and charcoal that could be remains of hearth sweepings. Like the case of disposal in water wells, objects that were still potentially usable are also found, such as hairpins, spindle whorls, axes, arrowheads, awls, and other items (as depicted in Institute of Archaeology 2013, 670–694). Divination bones are also found in ash pits. Were they disposed of because they were no longer useful or does subterranean deposition involve something more than simply refuse disposal? Other ritual residues are also found in these pit deposits: pieces of ceramic libation vessels (associated with elite ritual when bronze counterparts are discovered), and other vessel types considered feasting indicators in this region (Reinhart 2015a; Underhill 2002).

One pit found near a multi-room house (possibly a row-house) in the potters' area was particularly difficult for excavators to interpret. It is described as a sacrificial pit in one section of the report and as a disturbed tomb in another. Pit H105 contained potsherds, remains of a bronze libation vessel, a stone axe, bone intermingled with cinnabar, a bone arrowhead, pieces of a dagger-axe, a divination bone, a red plaster feature, a shell feature, and a polished tooth/shell/bone feature. However, no information is provided in the reports on the context of the artifacts in the pit. The contexts and detailed reporting, as for the examples already described, is crucial to piecing together the activities that led to the deposition.

Human and animal burials

The burial of bodies in the ground was another important depositional practice at Erligang and Shang sites. During mortuary proceedings and other activities known as “sacrifice”, bodies of people and animals were buried in graves and pits. As mentioned earlier, pits that differ from typical ash pits, containing human/animal bodies and sometimes pottery, are referred to as “sacrificial pits”. These are thought to reflect the practice referred to in late Shang elite divination inscriptions of killing animals and people as votive offerings to ancestors and otherworldly beings.

A number of pits containing the remains of articulated animals were discovered in the Yanshi potters' area, including a cow pit, a sheep/goat pit, and several dog pits. Pig-pits and pits containing other types of animal were also found in the elite palace compound (Institute of Archaeology 2002). Interpretation of animal pits as votive offerings is more convincing in some contexts and less convincing in others, though none of the animal pits are described in great detail in reports. A sheep pit in unit T33, for example, was found in an area that also contained other suspected “ritual” remains (Reinhart 2015a). But a cow pit, H200, is more ambiguous, though it is listed in the report as sacrificial remains. In this pit, the cow was placed on its side. The pit was just large enough to contain its body and the report mentions no potsherds. If the

cow had died of disease, it may have been buried for public health reasons. Analysis of the faunal remains with attention to butchery marks and more detailed reporting would assist interpretation.

Pits containing human remains are also found at Yanshi, in several areas of the site. These burial pits contrast with typical Neolithic and early Bronze Age burials in northern China. In typical burials, bodies were laid out in a respectful manner (often supine and with pottery and/or burial objects), but in pits, human bodies were often deposited in twisted positions, sometimes dismembered or treated with violence (see Liu 2004 and Reinhart 2015b for Neolithic examples of this practice). Sometimes, pottery is found with the remains; in some cases, human and animal bodies are found together. Pit H21, for example, associated with a structure that may have been an arsenal or storage facility of the palace, excavators found a skeleton in a pit with its back on the pit-bottom but feet resting on the pit-wall along with broken pottery around the upper part of the body.

A particularly ambiguous pit is H124, located close to small houses in the potters' area. The body of a person was deposited in the bottom of a small pit, which was then filled with loose soil and potsherds, some of which were refit into 5 vessels. The body was not carefully laid out but deposited in a twisted flexed position (Institute of Archaeology 2013, 352). Is this a traditional "sacrificial" pit in which refuse was also deposited? Aside from the body, the contents of the pit are similar to other ash pits in the area. Excavators write that they cannot rule out ritual activity related to the houses but the pit is not listed in the "sacrificial remains" section. More information would be needed on the context and characteristics of the pottery and the human remains before activities that led up to the deposition can be reconstructed.

The potters' cemetery

At Yanshi, the dead were typically buried in rectangular pit graves (though no graves have yet been discovered associated with the palace). Burial objects, especially food and drink vessels, were often included in the burial. This mortuary practice is similar to other contemporaneous sites in the region. It dates back into the Neolithic (Fung 2000; Nelson 2003; Underhill 2002) and also carries forward into the later Shang at sites such as Anyang, where residents across the social spectrum were buried in a similar fashion (Tang 1999, 2004).

What appears to be a cemetery was discovered in the potters' area at Yanshi, separated from small houses described previously by a thin pounded-earth wall. 14 ordinary rectangular burials were unearthed in the only unit excavated. Most of the burials contained individuals in extended supine position; some burials contained black marks or soft red soil round and under the skeleton, which excavators think may be residues of wooden coffins. Of the regular burials in the unit, 6 (43%) were buried with pottery vessels, 2 (14%) contained other burial objects, and 6 (43%) contained no burial goods. All but one of the burials that contained pots were described

by excavators as having pots that were broken prior to placement on or around the body of the deceased (this is understood from the position and cross-fit of the pieces). (Examples will be presented in the talk.)

The practice of breaking bowls occurs in contemporary death ritual in northern China and in other Chinese communities, such as in Taiwan. In communities in northern China, Naquin (1988) observed that a bowl is broken by the head mourner when the coffin of the deceased is removed from the house. Thompson (1988) illustrates a similar practice in Taiwan. While these examples are anachronistic, and I am not arguing for continuity of traditions over this long time period (though there may be), they do illustrate that mortuary proceedings do not only occur at gravesides, where archaeologists typically situate them. These examples also illustrate again the blending of daily life and ritual as traditionally conceived, with the presence of pots, often very ordinary looking pots. This implies a citation between the home and the graveside, perhaps between the world of the living and the other world.

Pit K1

A pit found in the potters' cemetery area elegantly illustrates the ambiguities in classifying deposits at Yanshi. Pit K1 was dug in the past in the cemetery unit just described. It was dug above a fairly typical burial, M30, towards the end of occupation at the site (Institute of Archaeology 2013, 428–433). The pit was cut into a hard ground surface on which clear trademarks were visible to excavators. This suggests that it is a more public area or that there was a public event. A layer of relatively clean soil was deposited at the base of the pit and a child, who was 7 to 10 years old, was placed on one side of the pit. The child was buried a grave and stones were placed on the shoulders, abdomen, knees, and feet. Greenish-brown soil was then deposited on top and a layer of stones was laid neatly across the rest of the pit in an orderly fashion. Above this, the pit was widened into an oval-rectangular shape and two more children were placed in the pit. They were of similar age to the first child and were laid down in prone position, also without graves. One of the children was laid against the wall of the pit with wrists bound behind the back and ankles also likely bound. The curvature of the child's body against the pit-wall suggests that it was not stiff when laid down. Bodies of both children were covered with stones. In the middle of the pit, a pig was placed on its side in an articulated position. Its skeleton was missing hind quarters, perhaps removed for meat during a feast? Two rectangular pit-graves were dug in the upper layer of the pit, on opposite sides of the pit. A child of similar age as the others was placed in each grave with their heads oriented towards the center of the pit. In one of the graves, a tripod vessel was placed at the of the grave underneath the body body, which was placed with hands beneath head. The grave was then filled with yellowish-brown soil. In the other grave, another child's body was placed in a flexed prone position with stones placed on the body. A pottery basin was placed near the head and a shell knife was placed in the grave, which was then filled with grayish-brown soil. The top layer of the

pit was then capped with grayish-brown soil mixed with pottery sherds of various types. However, despite the fact that there were many sherds, no vessels could be restored.

Pit K1 is ambiguous because it contains elements of so-called “sacrificial pits”, regular ash-pits, and typical burials. The three children placed in the the lower part of the pit were buried in the pit fill without graves and without burial objects. One also exhibited signs of restraint. But the two children buried in the upper part of the pit were buried in rounded-rectangular graves and had typical burial objects. However, one of the two graves was seriously disturbed when an elaborate burial (M13) was added later, suggesting that the disturbed grave was not important enough to remain undisturbed. In addition, K1 was capped with material comprised of soil mixed with potsherds, typical fill for pit generic pit deposits at Yanshi. More detail on the degree of abrasion of the sherds in the top layer of K1 would greatly assist interpretation.

Discussion

Archaeological remains that we tend to identify as ritual remains in this historic context, such as divination bones, bodies of animals and humans buried in pits, and remains of feasts, are found in various archaeological features around the residential area of the potters’ community at Yanshi. Divination bones are found in pits, ditches, and graves. Pit burial of humans and animals are found outside houses, in a well, and in the cemetery area. Feasting and potential evidence of the libations is found around houses in features that also contain what we tend to interpret as daily refuse. Potential signs of votive offerings, the throwing of useful items into pits and wells, is also seen in the residential area. In graves, items from the domestic sphere are found, such as food vessels.

A similar pattern of blended “ritual” and “refuse” deposition is seen at an earlier Bronze Age site in the region. At the Erlitou site of Huizui, which is located not far from Yanshi, a study by Lee and Bestel (2007) indicates that plant remains were deposited in all feature types, including domestic ash pits and ditches, living surfaces, production spaces, and production refuse areas. The authors suggest that Huizui residents may have indiscriminately dumped their refuse. Such a pattern, essentially similar to the seemingly indiscriminate deposition in the Yanshi potters’ area, may reflect loose social rules regarding deposition. But it may also reflect a worldview in which ritual and daily life are less separable. Joanna Brück (1999) has argued that the tendency for archaeologists to separate “ritual” and “functional” is a product of Western Enlightenment thinking and that “ritual” versus “mundane” is a false dichotomy. She cites ethnographic examples of societies with “monist” modes of thought that do not structure the world according to dichotomies, thus there is no “culture” versus “nature” and no separation between “ritual” and “mundane”. One of her examples, from the Solomon Islands, illustrates this blending of what we would think of as functional and ritual. During canoe-launching when waves are very high, elders recite magical chants and toss beach plants into the waves (Brück 1999, 319). Canoe-launching (what we might consider an ordinary activity) is performed simultaneously with

magical chanting (what we might consider a ritual activity). For the Solomon Islanders, this is not a special ritual practice, but a practical approach to solving a problem of dangerous waves.

Activities that scholars of Bronze Age China tend to identify as “ritual” practices include the related practices of divination, sacrifice, and feasting (e.g. Chang 1983; Flad 2008; Lewis 1990; Reinhart 2015a). Late Shang elite divination inscriptions from Anyang suggest that people thought that ancestors and otherworldly beings acted in the real world, causing harm or benefit to the community or to individuals. Offerings (“sacrifice”) were made to propitiate these beings to solve real-world problems: abundant harvests, successes in battle, drought quenching rains, and resolution of illness (Allan 1991; Keightley 1978). The steps taken to solve the problems may have seemed practical to the people living at Yanshi, not as special ritual acts. Moreover, the procedures were extensions of the activities of daily life: divination is an extension of communication and conversation with relatives; votive offerings, feasting, and libation refer to sharing a meal with family or feeding a dependent; and sacrifice is an extension of the killing of plants and animals to acquire food. There is an blending of what we consider ritual and daily practice and an interweaving of seen and unseen worlds.

The tendency in Chinese archaeology to set ritual apart from that which it isn't (“ash pits” versus “sacrificial pits”) is influenced not just by post-Enlightenment thinking as Brück (1999) suggests, but also, perhaps, by the Confucian focus on ritual (Li 2013) and the intellectual heritage derived from it. The Anyang divination inscriptions reveal that there were terms for specific ritual procedures and ritual objects, such as “burnt offering” or “exposure offering” (Keightley 2000; Schafer 1951), but a general concept of “ritual” (*li*) as it appears in the classics such as the *Liji* does not seem to have developed until after the Shang.

Methodological Implications

As many of the examples I have presented demonstrate, reporting of depositional features is typically not carried out in great detail. At Yanshi, pits are described according to a standard set of variables, including size, shape, color and texture of soil, artifact types, pot types represented by potsherds, quantity of pots refit from sherds, and very general stratigraphic relationships between the pit and other features, though not for all features. There is little if any reporting on contextual relationships between items in pits (though sometimes fill layering is reported). In order to interpret the events or activities that led up to deposition, it is important to bring rigor to excavation and reporting of all depositional features, even the most banal: fine resolution during excavation, recording, and reporting, and good contextual control.

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