AN ANALYSIS OF MORTUARY RITUAL
AT THE DAWENKOU SITE,
SHANDONG, CHINA

BY

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Abstract
For over twenty years, scholars have regarded the cemetery at the Dawenkou site in Shandong as providing important evidence for social ranking and other aspects of social organization during the Neolithic period. Most studies have focused on reconstructing status levels within specific time periods. Recent studies of burials in different areas of the world have shown the utility of examining change over time in mortuary ritual from the perspective of both the individual site and the region. They also demonstrate that it is necessary to consider the ideology and strategies of living people mourning the deceased. This paper examines change over time in the following aspects of mortuary ritual at the Dawenkou site: the mortuary population (total number of graves, age, sex, number of bodies per grave), body disposition, orientation of graves, and variation in characteristics that may be symbolic of status differences: size of grave, kind of grave, and prestige goods. It suggests how scholars can examine change over time in mortuary ritual at Dawenkou sites from a regional perspective. This procedure could reveal insights about change over time in sociopolitical organization and ideology. Burials from the Dawenkou Culture are very important, since habitation remains are not abundant or reported in as much detail. Data from the Chinese Neolithic period can make an important contribution to theoretical and methodological debates among archaeologists in many areas about analysis of burials.

Debates about analysis of burials always have been present in archaeology. In North America during the 1970's and early 1980's, most archaeologists analyzed mortuary data in order to reconstruct social organization. Many studies focused on investigating status differentiation in terms of wealth and social position with the goal of identifying status levels in specific time periods. Some studies also examined spatial characteristics of cemeteries in order to infer types of social groups represented. Scholars used cross-cultural ethnographic data to generalize about mortuary practices. They assumed that mortuary practices directly reflect social organization (Binford 1971; Peebles and Kus 1977; Rothschild 1979; Goldstein 1980; Brown 1981).
Since the mid-1980's, a number of archaeologists have argued that mortuary practices should be examined within specific historical contexts and that studies should focus on ideology. Mortuary rites may distort rather than directly reflect social relations. Furthermore, studies must consider the strategies of living people mourning the deceased and making decisions about mortuary ritual (Hodder 1982, 1984; Pearson 1982, 1984, 1993; Cannon 1989). Some scholars focus on individual cemeteries while others maintain that mortuary practices must be examined from a regional perspective (Beck 1995). Many scholars argue that generalizations about mortuary practices in different areas of the world are not justified. However, Carr (1995) demonstrates that there are some strong cross-cultural patterns linking certain aspects of ideology and social organization to certain kinds of mortuary practices.

The Dawenkou Culture of Shandong province, ca. 4300-2400 B.C., is known primarily from burials (Shandong Daxue Lishixi Kaogu Yanjiushi 1979; Zhongguo Shehuikexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1984; Chang 1986; Fung 1994). Many scholars argue that Dawenkou Culture sites, especially the rich site of Dawenkou, excavated in 1959, provide good evidence for social ranking during the middle Neolithic period. They agree that there are marked differences in wealth (Shandong Sheng Wenwu Guanlichu and Ji'nan Shi Bowuguan 1974; Shandong Sheng Bowuguan 1978; Shandong Daxue Lishixi Kaogu Yanjiushi 1979; Wang Xiping 1986, Wu Ruzuo 1987; Gao Guangren 1989). Studies of Dawenkou Culture burials by scholars outside of China include Pearson (1981, 1988), Keightley (1991), Kim (1994), and Underhill (1983). These studies represent diverse approaches, from the investigation of social ranking by comparing burials (Pearson 1981, Underhill 1983, Kim 1994), to ideology and patterning within individual burials (Keightley 1991; Pearson 1988). The abundant raw data presented in published reports of Neolithic cemeteries make it possible for different interpretations to be made.

My own thinking about theoretical and methodological approaches has changed since I first analyzed burials from the Dawenkou site (Underhill 1983) using raw data from the original report (Shandong Sheng Wenwu Guanlichu and Ji'nan Shi Bowuguan 1974). This paper draws upon much of my original analyses but provides a different focus in interpretation of the results. The major goal of my first study was to identify rank groups within different periods at the cemetery on the basis of multivariate statistical methods such as cluster analysis. Like some other archaeologists, I no longer believe it is appropriate or feasible to reconstruct the social organization of a given period from mortuary data, especially on the basis of only one site. Instead, studies should examine the nature and rate of change over time in different