DIFFERENTIAL RESOLUTION IN HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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Abstract

History and archaeology often operate on different levels of resolution. Using archaeological means to solve historical questions is at best difficult if not impossible. Historical chronology demands exact dates, whereas archaeological chronology provides only a rough framework of time. Regardless of the recent technological advancement in radiocarbon dating, it still has little impact in the determination of historical chronology. Nevertheless, the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project has fostered a close relationship between the radiocarbon specialists and archaeologists and produced a fine-grained radiocarbon chronology of the Three Dynasties. This new archaeological absolute chronology revolutionizes the thinking of the interaction of political change and culture change.

History and archaeology, which both study the past, are two closely related but different disciplines. Their disparity is attributable to the radically different form and nature of their primary sources of information, which are written text and material remains, respectively. Because of this, history is able to address questions of great details and can focus on individuals, exact time, locations, and events. On the contrary, archeology is strong in addressing questions of great time depth, and emphasizes the recovery of general patterns. We can extrapolate general patterns of human behavior from historical information; however, using archaeological material to answer questions of high resolution may forever remain elusive.

Radiocarbon dating in archaeology has undergone a series of technological innovations that has vastly improved its precision. The error terms of both radiocarbon dates and calibrated calendar dates have been reduced to unprecedented small margins. Yet even this increasingly fine resolution is still inadequate for fixing exact dates in early Chinese history. The newly derived fine-grained archaeological absolute chronology of early China, nevertheless, is instrumental for the generation
of some intriguing insights of past human behavior and culture that were not possible before.

**Historical paradigm and archaeological paradigm**

History and archaeology have their own disciplinary constraints. All written documentations are biased records of the past. The number of historical events is practically infinite and is impossible for any individual to completely comprehend. Even when voluminous history books are compiled, there is a practical limit requiring the selection of topics and information to be included. In the preface to the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian), Sima Qian frankly admitted that he was highly selective in using the information in the court archives. It is often the case that what is included in the history books are “important” topics, events, and human actors. They have been filtered through the paradigm of the historians. In short, there is no value-free documentation.

The bias of archaeological information is of a different kind. What we have in history is almost exactly the reverse image of what we have in archaeology. The material remains are mostly the results of mundane daily activities. The archaeological record is incomplete because it is the result of the behavioral modes of the people and the differential preservation of material remains. Many graves of individuals of great importance have been excavated, but they were only the final resting places of these individuals. We cannot be certain how this final funerary treatment represents the totality of their long lives. Given the difference in constraints, history and archaeology should be two different disciplines operating within their own independent paradigms.

Regardless of the natural limitation of its source material, the prevalent orientation of archaeological practice in China is historical. It is no secret that the role of archaeology, particularly that of historical archaeology, in China is to “zheng jing bu shi 証經補史 (“verify the classical canons and supplement the history”). Solving historical questions is prestigious in the Chinese scholarly community. By being firmly lodged within the contemporary discourse of history, however, Chinese archaeology has lost its independent identity.

Because the agenda of Chinese archaeology is determined by history, the archaeology of the Bronze Age Three Dynasties period concentrates on the seeking of one-to-one correspondence between the historical record and the archaeological record (Thorp 1991, Falkenhausen 1993). One of the dominant themes in early historical texts is the consecutive succession of the dynasties, kings, and capitals. Archaeologists have been focusing on finding the archaeological remains directly correspond