

# History of Study on Craft Production in Anthropological and Archaeological Studies in China



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**Submission:** October 30, 2017; **Published:** November 28, 2017

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## Abstract

The study of craft production has long been a key issued in archaeological and anthropological research which is directly related to development of society. This article provides a brief review of the studies on craft production in academic world in China after the 20th century, discusses both external and internal driving forces of this field in China. The author also suggests new perspectives for research and understanding on Chinese cases in future projects.

**Keywords:** Craft production; Chinese archaeology; Chinese anthropology

## Introduction

“Craft production” in archaeological studies refers to the manufacturing of materials such as ceramics, stone tools, wooden objects, textiles, and metal objects [1]. This production is distinct from modern industrial mass-production in scale: “craft” items are hand-made single pieces or in small quantities, not produced en masse by a machine or complex automated process. Like other economic activities such as agriculture and trade, craft production is one of the fundamental parts of ancient society. It provides both necessities and luxury goods as required or desired by people in different social levels.

## History of study on craft production in China

Modern studies of traditional craft production in China started from anthropological field survey conducted by both Western and Chinese scholars. Between 1921 and 1930, Rudolf P Hommel made field trips to China (mostly to the central provinces of eastern China) under the sponsorship of the Bucks County Historical Society’s Mercer Museum, to record and take photos of “primitive industries” of China. More than 500 photos were taken of craft activities such as methods and tools for food processing, textile making, architecture building, and transportation. With concise but accurate descriptions on tools, locations, history and geographic distribution of certain techniques, Hommel published his findings merely ten years after the survey [2]. This early work is still extraordinarily valuable because some of the traditional techniques have been lost through time [3]. Another early field study of Chinese craft production was conducted by art historian TAN Danjiong 谭旦岡 in Sichuan Province, from 1941 to 1946. He and his colleagues took about 150 photographs and made 120 drawing and maps that

recorded local handicraft industries. Tan’s later publication also covers traditional craft production of textile, salt/sugar, ceramic, metal objects, transportation, etc. [4]. Compared to Hommel’s work, Tan provided more detailed descriptions of the various methods and their tools [5].

In addition to further ethnological and anthropological surveys on Chinese soil [6,7] archaeological excavation became the main source for scholars to investigate ancient craft production through first-hand materials. Archaeological studies were also deeply tied with cultural explanation and reconstruction of ancient society. It was largely influenced by Marxism after founding of People’s Republic of China in 1949, when communism became the dominating theory in social sciences, and sought to explain issues concerning the relationship between production and early states [8]. In their approach of early craft production specialization, Chinese archaeologists from the 1950s to 1990s tended to rely heavily on political explanations, arguing that craft production and specialization was closely related to social stratification during the formation of early states in China [9,10]. They suggested that the appearance of pottery, jade, metal, and other manufactured goods and their workshops must be directly associated with the rise of complex society, which is traditionally recognized as emerging in North China during the late Neolithic period around 3000BCE. This politically-oriented thinking left out consideration of the economic aspects of production, such as quick access to certain type of material.

Despite an apparent lack of theoretical discussion since 1950s, with abundant excavations and artifacts from recent

decades all over China, archaeologists have made considerable progress in studies of production location, artisans' identities, technological changes, and distribution of products [11]. For example, in research of pen-annular jade artifacts excavated from the predynastic Zhou culture site of Zhouyuan in Shaanxi Province, archaeologists have been able to identify individual artisans and investigate their social status via textual and burial research [12]. Examination of the different scales and layouts of tombs, as well as the abundance of burial goods around the production center, indicate that 82% of the tomb occupants were free laborers who were buried in mid-level tombs with their personal property, including pottery, ornaments, and jade production related tools. This result counters previous ideas that the primary workforce in Early Zhou were slaves. In another case, through ethnographic analogy, archaeologists visited a local brick production site at Bancun in Mianchi County, Henan Province to investigate traditional dome kilns and production sequence of red and grey bricks. He compared his findings with a similar excavated kiln site, and then further suggests that ancient techniques were well inherited and preserved in local modern workshop. With this continuation of tradition, archaeologists can visualize and reconstruct ancient craft production [9].

With recent increasing joint-excavations and interchange of archaeological data between already established Chinese methods and craft production research in the Western world, archaeologists who conduct their research on Chinese materials have started to rethink how to link relatively isolated data from Chinese sites to a general theoretical discussion of craft production. At least two new avenues of research have been opened. The first is by applying existing research models to Chinese cases. In research of pottery production during the Longshan Period in northern China, Underhill was able to discuss modes of ceramic production over a large region with supporting evidence in the form of local data on ceramic variability, production location, and ceramic technology [13]. The second avenue is through evaluation of assumptions that have been made based on archaeological findings outside of China. In his studies of salt production at the first millennium BCE site of Zhongba, Sichuan Province, Flad suggests the decoupling of simplistic assumptions and the reevaluation of concepts such as "context" in production processes described in previous archaeological literature [14-15].

## Conclusion

When facing Chinese archaeological data generated in an area of such great diversity in space and time, it is difficult to maintain a conversation on craft production as a whole under the circumstances since many of these data are still waiting for careful interpretation. The author believes this trend of accumulating research information from individual sites and regional studies, first focusing on analysis and reconstruction of a single type of material and its production will be more feasible

for archaeologists who are interested in piecing evidence together to fill in the gaps in Chinese ancient craft production studies.

## Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Professor Robert Murowchick (Boston University Center for the Study of Asia) for the suggestions on this subject.

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DOI: [10.19080/GJAA.2017.02.555585](https://doi.org/10.19080/GJAA.2017.02.555585)

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