



The “Proto-State”/ “Chiefdom” Controversy and the Study of the Origins of Chinese Civilization

Chen Shengqian

To cite this article: Chen Shengqian (2023) The “Proto-State”/ “Chiefdom” Controversy and the Study of the Origins of Chinese Civilization, *Social Sciences in China*, 44:4, 54-70, DOI: [10.1080/02529203.2023.2290818](https://doi.org/10.1080/02529203.2023.2290818)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02529203.2023.2290818>



Published online: 20 Dec 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 19



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The “Proto-State”/“Chieftdom” Controversy and the Study of the Origins of Chinese Civilization

Chen Shengqian

School of History, Renmin University of China

Abstract

“Proto-state” and “chieftdom” are two major theories used in exploring the origin of Chinese civilization. There is much debate about the relationship between the two and about their academic significance. In several respects, the questions answered by the two theories are distinctly different: the perspective of the one is emic, of the other etic, and their research paths are respectively humanistic and scientific. The chieftdom theory derives from anthropology; it is evolutionist and its theories are constructed by analogy. Its strong point lies in exploring the mechanisms of the development of social complexity, but when used in archaeological research, the logic employed is deductive reasoning. The proto-state theory comes from Chinese archaeology, and thus is historicist. Its strong point lies in understanding cultural meanings, and the research logic it employed is inductive reasoning. The two theories represent research paths that are complementary but not interchangeable. The purpose of exploring the origins of Chinese civilization is not only to find the truth of history, but also to understand and inherit its culture. Therefore, it is important to fully combine the two theories in building the discourse system of Chinese archaeology.

Keywords: proto-state, chieftdom, origins of Chinese civilization, archaeological theories

Over the years, the origins of the state or civilization have been a hot topic in academic research both in China and abroad, attracting widespread attention from scholars in various disciplines. In the past two decades, significant research projects have been carried out on this topic, resulting in considerable progress. In recent years, especially with the continuous emergence of new archaeological discoveries, the origins of Chinese civilization have become a central issue in current Chinese archaeological research. In the author’s view, “chieftdom” and “proto-state” are the two most representative theories in the current research on the origins of Chinese civilization. Each theory represents a different perspective and methodology, and the contradictions between them reflect deep-seated issues in Chinese archaeology. It can even be said that the difficulty in communication between different disciplines in the current research on the origins of Chinese civilization is partially attributable to these issues. Since

there have been no specialized discussions on relevant issues in academia so far, this article attempts to analyse and compare the central questions, research perspectives, and approaches of the two theories. We then return to the study of archaeological materials related to the origins of Chinese civilization to examine their applicability. On the basis of this examination, we explore the path of research in the quest for the origins of Chinese civilization.

I. Proposed Theories

1. *Chieftdom theory*

The chieftdom theory originated in functionalist anthropology in the first half of the 20th century and was formally established in the 1950s. It gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, with its main proponent being the American anthropologist Elman Service. According to Service, the theory was inspired by the research of the anthropologist Kalervo Oberg, who referred to a social organizational form in between tribe and state found in the lowland tribal societies of South America as “chieftdom.”¹ In his 1962 book *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*, Service saw chieftdom as a universally significant stage of social evolution.² He continued to use this term in his later major work, *Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution*.³ Starting in the 1970s, the chieftdom theory was applied to the interpretation of archaeological materials, with notable work such as that of Colin Renfrew’s research on the Wessex megaliths in Britain.⁴ In the 1980s, this theory was introduced to China by the Chinese-American archaeologist Kwang-Chih Chang,⁵ who utilized it to explore the issue of the origins of Chinese civilization.

Service believed that the evolution of human societies underwent a general developmental process of “band-tribe-chieftdom-state.”⁶ In contemporary Western academia, chieftdom is defined as a political unit with a stratified or ranked social structure (composed of a small elite and a larger population). In chieftdom societies, public authority is exercised by a chief, often accompanied by subordinate village leaders at a lower level, who effectively controls a region consisting of several villages.⁷ According to this definition, chieftdom can provide public goods such as security and basic welfare, and have shamanic or religious leaders (priests), as well as specialized craftsmen. However, these craftsmen do not exclusively produce luxury goods for the chief, and there are as yet no fixed public officials or related institutions.

Service’s model is primarily derived from a large body of ethnographic materials, with

1 Kalervo Oberg, “Types of Social Structure among the Lowland Tribes of South and Central America,” p. 484.

2 Elman R. Service, *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*, 2nd ed.

3 See Elman R. Service, *Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution*.

4 C. Renfrew, “Monuments, Mobilization and Social Organization in Neolithic Wessex,” pp. 539-558.

5 See Kwang-Chih Chang, *The Chinese Bronze Age*, p. 24.

6 Elman R. Service, *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*, 2nd ed., pp. 170-177.

7 Claudio Cioffi-Revilla, *Introduction to Computational Social Science: Principles and Applications*, 2nd ed., p. 320.

ethnography serving as the foundational material for the chiefdom theory. Prior to this, many researchers had proposed similar general models. The difference lies in the fact that Service possessed more comprehensive ethnographic data. The era in which Service worked can be regarded as the peak period of ethnographic research development, as the production of new ethnographic data significantly decreased thereafter. Although Service did also study ancient civilizations, the situation with archaeological materials was quite the opposite to that of ethnographic data. Research and archaeological materials related to ancient civilizations continued to grow, while Service's access to archaeological materials was very limited at that time, especially in the case of Chinese civilization. The stark contrast in the availability of foundational materials compels us to question whether the general model derived from modern ethnography is similarly applicable to ancient civilizations.

2. *Proto-state theory*

The proto-state theory was formally proposed by Su Bingqi in 1986. The concept of proto-states can be traced back to the Northern Seven Provinces Cultural Relics Conference held in Chengde, Hebei Province, in 1975. During discussions on the priorities for cultural relics preservation, Su Bingqi emphasized two main points: ancient cities and proto-states, which primarily referred to relics from historical periods. Later, the two concepts were integrated with the cultural area typology theory of archaeological cultures, giving rise to the concepts of ancient culture, ancient cities, and proto-states. According to Su, during the first decade or so after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, there was an attempt to mechanically apply Marxist classics and rigidly impose Soviet experience. However, practical experience showed that this approach was not effective. As a result, it became necessary to chart a unique path, return to archaeological materials, and address China's own issues—studying the historical processes of Chinese culture, the Chinese ethnic group, and the Chinese nation. Su explained, “At the time, the issue of archaeological cultural typology was introduced as an academic concept and methodology, without directly addressing the key questions of field archaeology. Once the topics were clarified, the challenge was how to implement them. Presenting the concept or topic of ‘ancient culture, ancient cities, proto-states’ is precisely aimed at addressing the aforementioned issues.” According to Su, “Ancient culture mainly refers to primitive culture; ancient cities primarily refers to the initial differentiation between urban and rural centers, not the commonly understood notion of cities or metropolises; and proto-states refer to stable, independent political entities that are above clans and tribes.”⁸ The specific material background for Su's proposal of the proto-state theory was the western Liaoning region, where a series of important sites such as Dongshanzui, Niuheiliang, and Hutougou had been discovered, exhibiting sacrificial remains represented by altar-mound combinations.

Su Bingqi had graduated from the History Department of Beijing Normal University in

8 Su Bingqi, “Ancient Culture, Ancient Cities, and Proto-States in Western Liaoning—With a Discussion of the Key Focus or Major Topics of Current Field Work.”

his youth, specializing in the archaeology of the Zhou and Qin dynasties. Later, his research expanded to prehistoric times. In the 1930s, he worked under the guidance of Xu Xusheng, who was well-versed in ancient history and also familiar with modern scientific method. Su Bingqi was a worthy successor to Mr Xu's scholarly ideas.⁹ Another important factor that led to the birth of the proto-state theory was Su Bingqi's personal practice of field archaeology. The combination of archaeological practice with ancient historical documents is a very natural research orientation for Chinese archaeological research. It is particularly necessary to note that the foundation of the proto-state theory is the theory of cultural area typology, and the heart of cultural area typology theory is archaeological culture. The term "culture" in "archaeological culture" actually refers to a series of standards or norms. It is distinct from the concept of culture in functionalist anthropology, where culture is seen as a means for humans to respond to external challenges and has functional significance.¹⁰ From this perspective, the proto-state theory is an archaeological theory rooted in field archaeology practice, whereas the chiefdom theory, on the other hand, is based on anthropological theories from ethnography.

The proto-state theory aimed to guide the archaeological research of its time, summarizing the forms of the origins of Chinese civilization on the basis of cultural typologies within archaeology. Its contribution lies in enabling Chinese archaeology to integrate achievements from various disciplines and collaboratively explore the significant issue of the origins of Chinese civilization. At the same time, the proto-state theory seeks to comprehend (rather than explain) the ways and intricacies of the origins of Chinese civilization. Its purpose is not to explain why and how Chinese civilization originated, and thus it does not delve into the mechanisms of civilization's origins.

3. *Views in the academic community regarding the two theories*

Currently, opinions in the academic community regarding the two theories can be broadly categorized into three main perspectives. The first perspective, often referred to as the anthropological or scientific view, holds that the chiefdom theory encompasses research findings from global anthropology, prehistoric civilizations, and Western thought. As Chinese civilization is a part of world civilizations, this perspective advocates the adoption of the chiefdom theory as an explanation of the origins of Chinese civilization.¹¹ In comparison, the proto-state concept is characterized by vague internal content, lack of clear extension, and an unscientific approach to theoretical construction.¹² In contrast, the second perspective criticizes the chiefdom theory and emphasizes the unique development of Chinese civilization. It argues for using the proto-state theory to explain the origins of Chinese civilization, asserting that the chiefdom theory falls short in explaining the diverse range of world civilizations. This perspective is grounded in historical

9 See Li Min, "Borne Out by Evidence: Xu Xusheng in the Intellectual History of Chinese Archaeology."

10 See Chen Shengqian, "Cultural Perspectives in Archaeology."

11 See Xu Hong, "The Intellectual Journey and Related Reflections on Exploring the Origins of the Chinese State in the Field of Chinese Archaeology."

12 See Zhu Naicheng, *Research on the Origins of Chinese Civilization*; Yi Jianping, "Analysis of the Three-Stage Theory of the Evolution of Ancient Chinese Society."

or humanities-oriented thinking. It also suggests that the theoretical debate has had minimal impact on archaeological research, as frontline archaeologists rarely employ the chiefdom concept.¹³ The third perspective takes a middle ground. It acknowledges the contributions of the chiefdom theory while recognizing the distinct path of development of Chinese civilization. However, it suggests that the concept of proto-state theory should be further enriched,¹⁴ or alternatively, that both theories may have their shortcomings.¹⁵

None of the three viewpoints above have discussed the theoretical foundations of the chiefdom and proto-state theories, so they cannot provide a rational positioning for the two theories. The two have been the subject of a considerable number of papers published in the academic community, and various viewpoints can be understood relatively comprehensively from the relevant overviews.¹⁶ In light of this, it is necessary to further analyse these two theories and distinguish between them.

II. Differences in Theoretical Meanings

1. Discussion of different concepts and their meaning for the origins of civilization

Generally, when we refer to the origins of civilization, we are essentially discussing the origins of the state, and this is a consensus within the academic community. However, there is considerable controversy surrounding the exact definition of the state. According to Engels, a state distinguishes itself from a tribe by its regional rather than bloodline-based division of citizens, as well as by the establishment of public authority for its rule.¹⁷ The fundamental characteristic of the state is the separation between public authority and the masses.¹⁸ In more recent interpretations, the state is perceived to possess a dual nature—serving as both a tool for the exploitation of public goods and as a provider of public goods.¹⁹ Nonetheless, numerous scholars have recognized that definitions of a state vary significantly and that the concept of the state is applicable to modern societies but less suitable for pre-modern societies.²⁰ The idea of the state itself is a modern concept, similar to the foundation of a state—the nation or people.

13 Such as Li Xueqin, *A Study of the Formation of Ancient Chinese Civilization and the Formation of the State*, pp. 11-13; Zhao Hui, “Research on the Issue of the Origins of Chinese Civilization in Archaeology,” pp. 1-12.

14 See Li Xinwei’s presentation at the Second Zhengzhou Forum of Chinese Archaeology (2019) · 70 Years of Chinese Archaeology, “New Perspectives on Neolithic Archaeology.”

15 See Wang Zhenzhong, “Current State and Reflections on the Study of Chinese Civilization,” pp. 44-469.

16 Such as Zhao Chunqing, “A Review and Reflection on the Study of the Origins of Chinese Civilization”; Chang Huaiying, “A Review of Research on the Origins of the State in the Chinese Academic Community in the Past Two Decades.”

17 See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 4, p. 187.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

19 Benoît Dubreuil, *Human Evolution and the Origins of Hierarchies: The State of Nature*, p. 202.

20 See Yi Jianping, “A Rediscovering of the Definition of the State.”

Like the concept of the state, the notion of civilization only emerged in the late 18th century. It contrasted with the idea of “barbarism” and was nurtured by the reformist spirit of the Enlightenment, making it a direct product of the Enlightenment’s reformist ideals.²¹ The concept of civilization is essentially linked to the notion of modernity and the meanings it carries. When debating culture and civilization, people are often, to a large extent, discussing the merits and demerits of modernity.²² In terms of the essence of civilization, Mazlish largely agrees with the viewpoint of an Iranian scholar, which suggests that civilization should encompass two inseparable aspects: first, a coherent worldview, which can manifest as a cultural system, an ideology, or a religion, with religion being the most prevalent form; and second, a consistent political, military, and economic system, often embodied in an empire or a historical framework.²³ The scope of civilization is broader than that of the state, and includes the state itself, as the state is an indispensable characteristic of civilization.

The discussion of the origins of civilization centered around the concepts of nation or civilization is mainly to be seen from the mid/late 19th century to the mid-20th century. The modernity associated with these two concepts largely restricts their applicability.²⁴ In other words, they are not suited to describing the social organizational forms of prehistoric civilizations or nascent states. In contemporary scholarly research, they are used only for general descriptions and are rarely employed for rigorous definitions within specific contexts. In order to avoid the concept of “state,” Dutch scholar Henri Claessen subsequently introduced the notion of “early state.”²⁵ Another term is “pre-modern state.”²⁶ However, the latter is more general and lacks the clear definition of the concept of “early state.” In the case of the chiefdom concept, following after Service, Timothy Earle proposed a developmental process that distinguished between simplicity and complexity.²⁷

2. *Fundamental meta-concepts: social complexity and systemic states*

In the past two to three decades, the Western archaeological community has increasingly employed the concept of “social complexity” when studying the origins of civilization.²⁸

21 See Bruce Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. 21.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

24 The term “modernity” here refers to a knowledge system that emerged with Western culture at its heart, based on Western capitalism. Its origins can be traced back to the Enlightenment movement, and it subsequently became the dominant intellectual framework alongside the scientific and industrial revolutions in the Western world. This framework includes a dualistic ontology of mind and matter, along with corresponding epistemological and value systems. Modernity advocates an individual-centered, Western-centric, anti-traditional universal value system, characterized by exclusivity and uniqueness.

25 Henri J.M. Claessen and Peter Skalník, “The Early State: Theories and Hypotheses,” pp. 3-29.

26 Jeremy A. Sabloff and Paula L.W. Sabloff, eds., *The Emergence of Premodern States: New Perspectives on the Development of Complex Societies*.

27 Timothy K. Earle, “Chiefdoms in Archaeological and Ethnohistorical Perspective,” pp. 279-308; Timothy K. Earle, “The Evolution of Chiefdoms,” pp. 84-88.

28 Jeremy A. Sabloff, “Extending Our Knowledge of Premodern States,” pp. 1-14.

In terms of spatial dimensions, social complexity, and graduated; in terms of temporal progression, it exhibits stages and also diversity. The intertwining of time and space complicates our assessment of social complexity. To address this, the concept of “systemic state” has been introduced as a measure of the degree of social complexity. This enables us to bridge concepts such as “early state” and “chiefdom,” forming a comprehensive sequence of varying degrees of social complexity. We can refer to social complexity and systemic states as “meta-concepts,” which possess a more encompassing nature. Thus, the contemporary academic discussion of the origins of states or civilizations is essentially an exploration of the developmental extent of system states and social complexity.

III. Differences in Perspectives: Emic and Etic

In the specific theoretical exploration of the origins of Chinese civilization, the theories of the chiefdom and the proto-state represent two distinct perspectives. The introduction of the chiefdom theory has enriched the theoretical discussion on the origins of Chinese civilization. However, domestic archaeologists tend to prefer the proto-state theory. The differences between the two cannot be simply categorized as open-minded versus conservative. Apart from the aforementioned distinctions in terms of meanings, there are at least two other aspects of differentiation between the two: one pertains to the observational perspective, and the other relates to logical reasoning.

1. The etic perspective

The representative figure of the chiefdom theory, Elman Service, emerged from the cultural evolutionist school within the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan. The chiefdom theory emphasizes cross-cultural applicability without necessarily taking into account influences such as sociohistorical context, cultural traditions, and individual agency. The etic perspective is advantageous for conducting comparative studies of the origins of civilizations, thereby uncovering the “mechanisms” or “patterns” behind their emergence.

However, there is an unresolved issue when applying the chiefdom theory in archaeological research. The chiefdom, as a form of social organization, has been extracted by anthropologists from ethnographic studies. Elevating it to a universally applicable stage of the development of human society, covering diverse civilization processes across different regions and eras, does not align with reality. This issue originates from the notion of modernity, which seeks universality, certainty, and absoluteness. Its research goal is to find a universal and absolute explanation.

2. The emic perspective

The blurring of subject and object was once a prominent feature of Chinese culture and one of the reasons for the inadequate development of modern Chinese science. Adopting an etic perspective, free from subjective influences, is more conducive to exploring the inherent

patterns of developmental processes. This advantage is vividly evident in the advancement of the natural sciences, where the emic perspective seems somewhat redundant. However, in the realm of humanities and social sciences, the emic perspective is irreplaceable. The proto-state theory is grounded in an emic perspective. Scholars have posed the question: What can Chinese scholars contribute to the theory of state origins?²⁹ At the very least, there is one answer to this question—we can contribute the emic perspective!

The etic perspective is more suitable for explaining the past, while the emic perspective is better suited for interpreting the past. At the Second “Xia Culture” International Symposium held at Henan University in July 2019, the question of the existence of the Xia dynasty was generally opposed by scholars from Europe and America (except for those of Chinese descent), almost without exception, while many Chinese and Japanese scholars supported it (with a few doubters among Chinese scholars).³⁰ Although this is just an isolated case, the case itself is worth noting. How does this situation arise? Why do Japanese scholars not align with Western scholars? This is because Western scholars’ perspective is etic, emphasizing science and empiricism; if it cannot be proven, it is considered non-existent (actually, it doesn’t align with Popper’s definition of science); whereas the emic perspective involves a holistic understanding of Chinese history and Chinese literature, which requires a genuine experience of Chinese civilization. Researchers with such experience will realize that the Shang civilization was already quite mature, and could not have emerged suddenly; historical records cannot all be baseless rumours; and many aspects of Chinese culture can be traced back to the Neolithic era. It is based on this kind of understanding that Chinese and Japanese scholars find common ground. Understanding is holistic, experiential, and intuitive, and cannot be reduced to logical analysis. The proto-state theory is precisely based on the understanding of ancient Chinese history; it is closely related to archaeological materials, historical texts, and the Chinese academic tradition—something that an etic perspective cannot achieve.

The task of reconstructing the past in Chinese archaeology goes beyond merely establishing the spatio-temporal framework of prehistory or understanding what exactly happened in the past. It should also encompass the reconstruction of cultural significance. The vehicles of Chinese culture extend beyond textual records to include material artifacts, and these material objects possess cultural significance and have their own formative processes. The purpose of reconstructing meaning is to preserve and promote cultural traditions, as well as to realize the practical value of cultural heritage. Such a task cannot be accomplished from an etic perspective; it requires an emic perspective.

It is worth emphasizing that the emic and etic perspectives are not simply in opposition, but rather represent a dialectical relationship, in which both opposition and complementarity exist. In anthropological research, the distinction and debate between emic and etic perspectives

29 See Xie Weiyang, “The Theory of State Origins: What Can Chinese Scholars Contribute?”, p. 5.

30 See Zhang Lidong, Li Jing and Ding Fulin, “Minutes of the Second ‘Xia Culture’ International Symposium.”

also exists.³¹ Since the 1980s, a “humanistic turn” has emerged in the field of archaeological theory, represented by post-processual archaeology, which emphasizes diverse narratives and expression on an equal footing. Correspondingly, “indigenous archaeology” has also emerged,³² representing an emic understanding of a specific locality or group. The emic and etic perspectives respectively represent two distinct research paths. The former emphasizes the humanistic aspect, while the latter stresses the scientific aspect. In the context of researching the origins of Chinese civilization, the proto-state theory is the one that can be better integrated with Chinese history, classical texts, and other sources, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the historical and cultural significance of archaeological materials. This helps to compensate for the limitations of the etic perspective. However, it is worth noting that the etic perspective can reveal aspects that the emic perspective might overlook. For example, when using burial materials to analyze social stratification in ancient Mesoamerica, the etic perspective may reveal finer distinctions than can be obtained through a direct historical approach based on the emic perspective,³³ thus compensating for its limitations.

IV. Distinctions in Logical Reasoning

The logical reasoning of contemporary archaeological research can be divided into two levels: micro and macro. On the micro level, hypotheses need to be formulated, followed by multidisciplinary analyses to test those hypotheses.³⁴ On the macro level, there are three reasoning approaches: induction, deduction, and analogy.³⁵ Deductive reasoning involves deriving hypotheses from theory that can be tested through material evidence. Induction involves ascending from factual material to higher-level concepts, rather than being confined to the characteristics and forms of the material. Analogy provides a framework of reference, aiding archaeologists in reconstructing the past.

The proto-state and chiefdom theories employ two distinct modes of reasoning. The proto-state theory employs an inductive logic derived from archaeological materials. The archaeologist Su Bingqi emphasizes familiarity with archaeological evidence. “Proto-state” is an abstract concept derived from archaeological materials. In other words, it serves as a tool for archaeologists and, like the concept of “archaeological culture,” borrows from related disciplines. Archaeological culture borrows the concept of culture from anthropology, while “proto-state” borrows the concept of state from political science. However, archaeological culture does not equate to culture in anthropology; it represents a combination of surviving

31 Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike and Marvin Harris, eds., *Emics and Etics: The Insiders/ Outsider Debate*.

32 See Chris Gosden, “Indigenous Archaeology,” pp. 149-153.

33 Benjamin A. Steere and Stephen A. Kowalewski, “Wealth Stratification in Ancient Mesoamerica,” pp. 20-48.

34 See Chen Shengqian, “The Structure of Archaeological Reasoning.”

35 See Chen Shengqian, “The Issue of ‘Seeing People through Objects’ in Archaeological Research.”

features within a certain spatial and temporal scope. Through this concept, archaeologists can study ancient communities (archaeological culture does not equate to ethnic groups). Similarly, “proto-state” does not equate to the political science definition of a nation-state; rather, it serves as a conceptual tool for archaeologists to study the process of societal complexity. Understanding this point is crucial for comprehending the significance of the proto-state theory. Reification of the concept of the proto-state, much like equating archaeological culture to ethnic groups, extends beyond the original scope of this theory.

Based on ethnographic studies, the chiefdom theory, logically speaking, is also inductive, albeit drawn from ethnographic materials. However, when applied in archaeological research, it should be categorized as analogical reasoning, where the origin of ancient civilizations is likened to processes of societal complexity observed in ethnographic contexts. Paradoxically, within archaeological investigations of the origin of civilizations, the chiefdom theory assumes the role of deductive reasoning. In this capacity, it functions as a universal theory, deducing and subsequently interpreting archaeological materials. Stemming from this theory, researchers deduce potential manifestations of material remains associated with chiefdoms: hierarchical settlement structures, differentiated grave burials, specialized artisanal production, and more. The success of deductive reasoning rests on several premises: first, the theory must possess sufficient universality; second, it should derive testable hypotheses from general theories; and last, it should be able to be supported by archaeological evidence. From the preceding analysis, we can observe that the primary controversy surrounding the chiefdom theory lies in its historical consistency. For instance, foreign researchers have not found the redistribution in archaeological materials highlighted by Service, particularly that of everyday necessities. Instead, exchanges and distributions primarily involve luxury goods or items of prestige.³⁶ Domestic scholars studying Chinese archaeological materials have noted similar phenomena.³⁷

To further determine the nature of the chiefdom theory, it might be helpful to compare it with relevant theories. Among existing theories, Marxism is the classic theory of the origins of civilization. It reveals the fundamental nature of the state and belongs to high-level theory. Marxism suggests that the choice of the governmental system is due to the fact that it can control the growing social contradictions better than a state of anarchy. By establishing certain rules, and especially creating governing institutions (the government) that are superior to the conflicting parties, it protects the interests of groups and individuals, preventing the internecine slaughter of a state of anarchy. Here, the state primarily safeguards the interests of the ruling class.³⁸ Theories of water conservancy,³⁹ agriculture,⁴⁰ and warfare⁴¹ in the origin of

36 Rita Smith Kipp and Edward M. Schortman, “The Political Impact of Trade in Chiefdoms,” p. 379.

37 See Li Xinwei, “The Formation of Long-Distance Communication Networks among the Upper Strata of Prehistoric Chinese Society.”

38 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 4, p. 187.

39 See Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*.

40 See Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself*, pp. 81-106.

41 Robert L. Carneiro, “A Theory of the Origin of the State,” pp. 733-738.

civilization are of a secondary level. They discuss the indispensable factors in the course of the general dynamics of state formation. For instance, agriculture leads to population growth (population density and total population size), settlement (fixed settlements and territories), and intensified competition within and between groups.⁴² Kohler *et al.* employed big data analysis from 64 archaeological sites on four continents (including Chinese sites such as Baiyinchanghan, Nantaizi, and Zhaobaogou), and noticed that the development of agriculture and political systems further promotes economic inequality. The Eurasian continent, which transitioned to an agricultural society earlier, was more unequal than the Americas.⁴³ The theory of warfare proposed by Carneiro combines agriculture and warfare within an ecological framework, suggesting that early states emerged in areas with limited agricultural expansion. Testart's "king-courtier" theory, introduced later, considers the origin of the state from the perspective of social relationships. He posits that states originated from dependency relationships, particularly beyond those between leaders and kin, and this can explain the rise of slave systems.⁴⁴ There is also the water conservancy theory, which emphasizes the role of irrigation infrastructure and management in the origin of the state. These complementary theories involve different aspects of the process of social complexity; they do not constitute exclusive explanations.

The chiefdom theory attempts to establish a cross-cultural and cross-temporal universality, capturing the mechanisms of human social complexity at the macro level. In his *Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution*, Service aimed to replace Marxist theories of the origins of civilization with the chiefdom theory. From this perspective, the chiefdom theory might appear to be a high-level theory. However, upon closer examination, its contribution is more akin to that of the "king-courtier" theory in terms of discussing the mechanisms of the formation of public authority and emphasizing the distribution of public resources. Nevertheless, the chiefdom theory does not clearly explain how societies transition from segmentary to hierarchical structures, and how individuals break free from existing social norms and value systems—what Francis Fukuyama terms the social capital of segmentary societies.⁴⁵

V. Discussion: Approaches to the Study of the Origins of Chinese Civilization Theories

The most significant division in contemporary academic research lies between science and the humanities. This division has profoundly influenced the theoretical methods of modern archaeology, with processual and post-processual archaeology respectively aligning with these

42 Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza, *L'Evoluzione Della Cultura*, pp. 152-160.

43 Timothy A. Kohler *et al.*, "Greater Post-Neolithic Wealth Disparities in Eurasia Than in North America and Mesoamerica," pp. 619-622.

44 Alain Testart, *La Servitude Volontaire*.

45 See Francis Fukuyama, "Social Capital," p. 143.

two orientations.⁴⁶ Scientific-oriented research centers on logical reasoning and emphasizes explanation, reflecting an alignment with universal principles, whereas the humanistic-oriented approach emphasizes understanding, highlighting individual agency and experience of empathy. Its research focuses on a meticulous historical analysis of context and background relationships, implying a confirmation of the subject's capacity for self-understanding. In contemporary historical and archaeological research, these two research orientations are often intertwined and hard to distinguish. The chiefdom theory leans towards a scientific orientation, being "evolutionary," emphasizing universal significance, and advocating exploration of the mechanisms behind the origins of civilization. The proto-state theory, on the other hand, is more inclined towards humanistic-oriented research. It directly applies a "historicist" historical approach, and is based on Chinese scholars' understanding of their own cultural traditions. This approach places a greater emphasis on tracing the significance of traditional Chinese culture. Feng Shi's exploration of astronomical archaeology is a representative and relatively successful example.⁴⁷ The origins of Chinese civilization go beyond the establishment of the state; it also encompasses the origins of Chinese cultural traditions or cultural genes.⁴⁸

For a long time, the purpose of exploring the origins of civilization and reconstructing ancient history has been to understand or reconstruct authentic history using a scientific approach. Researchers firmly believe in the existence of a determinate historical truth, and through continuous efforts, they believe they can grasp this ultimate reality, even though the path may be winding and difficult. However, there is another important purpose for exploring the origins of civilization and reconstructing ancient history, and that is to understand cultural significance. The objects of archaeology are material remains, the direct residues of people's production and life, imbued with cultural meaning in the course of this process, and these cultural meanings, in turn, influence the construction of society. If we follow the perspective of post-processual archaeology, material remains are like texts, and the major task of archaeological research should be interpretation.⁴⁹ To engage in the so-called the exploration of civilization without understanding Chinese civilization makes it impossible to fully approach historical truth. Research from a humanistic perspective does not depart from historical truth; on the contrary, it further promotes our understanding of historical reality.

Having clarified the research purpose, we turn to the methodology. Science and humanities, as two complementary paths, should receive equal attention. Material remains do not speak for themselves; to make them speak, one must employ archaeological reasoning, often referred to as "seeing people through objects." The entire process of reasoning involves at least five levels, including deduction, induction, and analogy.⁵⁰ In the study of the origins of Chinese

46 See Chen Shengqian, "Paradigms and Paradigm Changes in China's Archaeological Research."

47 See Feng Shi, *Continuity of the Illustrious Culture: Astronomy, Thoughts and Institutions in Ancient China*.

48 See Chen Shengqian, "The Cultural Genes of Prehistoric China."

49 Ian Hodder, "Postprocessual Archaeology," pp. 1-26.

50 See Chen Shengqian, "The Issue of 'Seeing People through Objects' in Archaeological Research."

civilization, research using deductive logic is relatively limited. Theoretical research focuses on ancient social realities rather than material remains, requiring further deduction to integrate the two. The chiefdom theory, rooted in abundant ethnographic materials, discusses specific societies rather than their material remains. Service constructed the chiefdom theory on the basis of ethnographic materials, making it a universally applicable theory and viewing it as an indispensable stage in the evolution of human societies. However, compared to the long history of human civilization, ethnographic materials are highly limited, especially concerning the origins of states. This leads to doubts about whether chiefdoms may represent atypical instances of social complexity. Therefore, some studies argue that the chiefdom theory fundamentally cannot encompass the diverse paths leading to social complexity and that the theory is a failure.⁵¹ Nonetheless, we can consider research conducted from an ethnographic perspective as a kind of historical experiment in the evolution of human societies.⁵² Such research provides valuable insights into our understanding of the mechanisms driving social complexity.

Starting from archaeological materials and encompassing as many cases as possible, extracting commonalities from them, and then elevating them to the level of theory is known as inductive reasoning. There are two key aspects to using inductive reasoning: first, having a sufficiently diverse set of cases, which must consider materials beyond China; and, in addition to ancient materials, relatively recent ethnographic materials must also be considered as they are part of human society. Second, there needs to be a process of elevation, since identifying common characteristics is not yet theory construction; a process of abstraction is needed to reach the theoretical level. From these two perspectives, in the context of research on the origins of Chinese civilization, achieving inductive reasoning is not easy because our research still lacks cases from other parts of the world and ethnographic materials. This is something that needs to be addressed in future research. Researchers have found that a lack of in-depth understanding of research outcomes on the origins of foreign civilizations hinders the in-depth progress of research on the origins of Chinese civilization.⁵³

In general, there is still considerable room for improvement in exploring the mechanisms behind the origins of Chinese civilization. The three paths of reasoning are complementary and indispensable. Deductive reasoning from theory to material has the advantage of allowing researchers greater creativity, making better use of theoretical achievements from related disciplines, and relying less on archaeological materials. However, there is a significant gap between theory and material, and effective deduction is not easy to achieve. Without this link, there is a risk of falling into the trap of “substituting theory for history,” where materials are

51 Alex W. Barker, “Chiefdoms,” p. 526.

52 See Jared Diamond and James A. Robinson, eds., *Natural Experiments of History*.

53 See Zhao Chunqing, “A Review and Reflection on the Study of the Origins of Chinese Civilization.”

directly fit into theoretical frameworks, effectively turning theory into history.⁵⁴ The strength of analogical reasoning lies in its vividness and concreteness, which are qualities often lacking in archaeological materials. Its weakness, however, lies in the differences in historical and cultural contexts, leading to inconsistencies between the past and present. Inductive reasoning, starting from materials and allowing them to speak, establishes a solid foundation. Yet, it comes at a higher cost, and obtaining sufficient materials can be challenging. Furthermore, the theories derived from inductive reasoning may go beyond the scope of existing materials, potentially leading to assumptions. In short, each path has its advantages and disadvantages, and no single path can fully resolve all issues. A comprehensive approach that integrates all three paths of reasoning is the necessary choice.

The philosophical foundation of the scientific approach rests on the dualism of subject-object separation. In contrast, research stemming from the humanistic perspective emphasizes the fusion of subject and object, highlighting how individuals continuously imbue the world with meaning through social practice while simultaneously inhabiting a world imbued with meaning. Consequently, comprehending and understanding cultural significance becomes a significant goal of research. Cultural meaning is attributed by people within the historical process, and the meaning ascribed to the same object may differ across different periods and societies. Therefore, the study of cultural meaning requires special attention to historical and societal contexts, requiring researchers to experience empathy and adopt in perspective-taking. This cannot be accomplished through logical reasoning; the objective is not achieving universality, but rather understanding. Our research on the origins of Chinese civilization, for example, pertains not only to the genesis of social complexity (the state) but also to the origins of Chinese cultural traditions, including rituals, intellectual concepts, aesthetics, and other facets. Over the past century or so, Chinese cultural traditions have been rapidly dissipating. One significant factor contributing to this erosion is that the appropriation of science, under the guise of pursuing a unified and universal “truth,” has undermined the essence of Chinese culture.

Over the past century, Chinese archaeology has been a process both of uncovering the ancient and submerged history of China and of rebuilding confidence in Chinese culture. Chinese civilization is a rare example of an uninterrupted civilization spanning over 5,000 years, yet it has undergone a virtual rupture in modern times. This has been reflected in archaeology’s neglect of the cultural significance of material remains. These remains, enriched with thousands of years of cultural meaning, have often been treated merely as objects of scientific value or as materials to validate theory, neglecting their crucial role as direct carriers of Chinese culture. The archaeological study of the origins of civilization not only seeks to reconstruct the authentic historical past but also requires understanding and interpretation of the cultural significance of China’s prehistoric civilizations. The theories of “chiefdom” and “proto-state,” as representative directions in research, should collaborate and work together.

54 See Su Bingqi, *A New Exploration of the Origins of Chinese Civilization*, pp. 3-7.

On the basis of this foundation, they can establish a distinctly individual discourse within Chinese archaeology's study of the origins of civilization.

Notes on Author

Chen Shengqian, PhD, is Professor and Doctoral Supervisor in the Department of Archaeology and Museology at the School of History, Renmin University of China. His primary research areas include archaeological theory, prehistoric archaeology, and lithic analysis. His representative works include the monographs *Reflections on Archaeology* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2018); *Modernization in Prehistory: From Hunting and Gathering to the Origins of Agriculture* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2020); *The Origins of Chinese Cultural Genes: An Archaeological Perspective* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2021); and *Essentials of Archaeological Research* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2022); and the research papers "Paradigms and Paradigm Changes in China's Archaeological Research" (*Social Sciences in China* [Chinese Edition], 2019, no. 2) and "The Unique Path of Early Chinese Social Power Evolution" (*Historical Research*, 2022, no. 2). E-mail: csq@ruc.edu.cn.

Notes on Translator

Li Guanghui is a freelance translator. E-mail: lgh@pku.org.cn.

References

- Barker, Alex W. "Chiefdoms." In R. Alexander Bentley *et al.*, eds. *Handbook of Archaeological Theories*. Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2009.
- Carneiro, Robert L. "A Theory of the Origin of the State." *Science*, vol. 169, 1970, no. 3947.
- Cavalli-Sforza, Luigi Luca. *L'Evoluzione Della Cultura*. Trans. Shi Dou. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2018.
- Chang, Huaiying. "A Review of Research on the Origins of the State in the Chinese Academic Community in the Past Two Decades." *Sichuan Cultural Relics*, 2016, no. 1.
- Chang, Kwang-Chih. *The Chinese Bronze Age*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1983.
- Chen, Shengqian. "Cultural Perspectives in Archaeology." *Archaeology*, 2009, no. 10.
- . "Paradigms and Paradigm Changes in China's Archaeological Research." *Social Sciences in China* (Chinese Edition), 2019, no. 2.
- . "The Cultural Genes of Prehistoric China." *Dushu*, July 2020, no. 7.
- . "The Issue of 'Seeing People through Objects' in Archaeological Research." *Archaeology*, 2014, no. 10.
- . "The Structure of Archaeological Reasoning." *Archaeology*, 2007, no. 10.
- Childe, Gordon. *Man Makes Himself*. Trans. An Jiayuan and Yu Jingdong. Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2008.
- Cioffi-Revilla, Claudio. *Introduction to Computational Social Science: Principles and Applications*, 2nd

- ed. Cham: Springer, 2017.
- Claessen, Henri J.M. and Peter Skalnik. "The Early State: Theories and Hypotheses." In *The Early State*. Hague: Mouton, 1978.
- Diamond, Jared and James A. Robinson, eds. *Natural Experiments of History*. Trans. Li Zenggang et al. Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2020.
- Dubreuil, Benoît. *Human Evolution and the Origins of Hierarchies: The State of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Earle, Timothy K. "Chiefdoms in Archaeological and Ethnohistorical Perspective." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 16, 1987.
- . "The Evolution of Chiefdoms." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 30, 1989, no. 1.
- Feng, Shi. *Continuity of the Illustrious Culture: Astronomy, Thoughts and Institutions in Ancient China*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2018.
- Fukuyama, Francis. "Social Capital." In Samuel P. Huntington and Lawrence E. Harrison, eds. *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*. Trans. Cheng Kexiong. Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 2013.
- Gosden, Chris. "Indigenous Archaeology." In Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, eds. *Archaeology: The Key Concepts*. Trans. Chen Shengqian. Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2012.
- Headland, Thomas N., Kenneth L. Pike and Marvin Harris, eds. *Emics and Etics: The Insiders/Outsider Debate*. Newbury Park: SAGE, 1990.
- Hodder, Ian. "Postprocessual Archaeology." *Advances in Archaeological Theory and Method*, vol. 8. Orlando: Academic Press, 1985.
- Kipp, Rita Smith and Edward M. Schortman. "The Political Impact of Trade in Chiefdoms." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 91, 1989, no. 2.
- Kohler, Timothy A. et al. "Greater Post-Neolithic Wealth Disparities in Eurasia Than in North America and Mesoamerica." *Nature*, vol. 551, 2017, no. 7682.
- Li, Min. "Borne Out by Evidence: Xu Xusheng in the Intellectual History of Chinese Archaeology." *Archaeology*, 2019, no. 6.
- Li, Xinwei. "New Perspectives on Neolithic Archaeology." Presented at the Second Zhengzhou Forum of Chinese Archaeology · 70 Years of Chinese Archaeology, 2019.
- . "The Formation of Long-Distance Communication Networks among the Upper Strata of Prehistoric Chinese Society." *Cultural Relics*, 2015, no. 4.
- Li, Xueqin. *A Study of the Formation of Ancient Chinese Civilization and the Formation of the State*. Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing House, 1997.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 4. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2012.
- Mazlish, Bruce. *Civilization and Its Contents*. Trans. Wang Hui. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2017.
- Oberg, Kalervo. "Types of Social Structure among the Lowland Tribes of South and Central America." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 57, 1955, no. 3.
- Renfrew, C. "Monuments, Mobilization and Social Organization in Neolithic Wessex." In *The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory*. London: Gerald Duckworth and Company, 1973.

- Sabloff, Jeremy A. "Extending Our Knowledge of Premodern States." In Jeremy A. Sabloff and Paula L.W. Sabloff, eds., *The Emergence of Premodern States: New Perspectives on the Development of Complex Societies*. Santa Fe: SFI, 2018.
- Sabloff, Jeremy A. and Paula L.W. Sabloff, eds. *The Emergence of Premodern States: New Perspectives on the Development of Complex Societies*. Santa Fe: SFI, 2018.
- Service, Elman R. *Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution*. Trans. Gong Xin, Guo Lusha and Chen Lizhi. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2019.
- . *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*, 2nd ed. New York: Random House, 1971.
- Steere, Benjamin A. and Stephen A. Kowalewski. "Wealth Stratification in Ancient Mesoamerica." *Social Evolution & History*, vol. 11, 2012, no. 1.
- Su, Bingqi. "Ancient Culture, Ancient Cities, and Proto-States in Western Liaoning—With a Discussion of the Key Focus or Major Topics of Current Field Work." *Cultural Relics*, 1986, no. 8.
- . *A New Exploration of the Origins of Chinese Civilization*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1999.
- Testart, Alain. *La Servitude Volontaire*. Paris: Errance, 2004.
- Wang, Zhenzhong. "Current State and Reflections on the Study of Chinese Civilization." In *Study of Prehistory Archaeology in China*. Xi'an: Sanqin Publishing House, 2003.
- Wittfogel, Karl A. *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*. Trans. Xu Shigu. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1989.
- Xie, Weiyang. "The Theory of State Origins: What Can Chinese Scholars Contribute?." *Chinese Social Sciences Today*, December 10, 2015.
- Xu, Hong. "The Intellectual Journey and Related Reflections on Exploring the Origins of the Chinese State in the Field of Chinese Archaeology." *The Central Plains Culture Research*, 2006, no. 2.
- Yi, Jianping. "A Rediscovering of the Definition of the State." *Historical Research*, 2014, no. 4.
- . "Analysis of the Three-Stage Theory of the Evolution of Ancient Chinese Society." *Social Sciences in China* (Chinese Edition), 2020, no. 11.
- Zhang, Lidong, Li Jing and Ding Fulin. "Minutes of the Second 'Xia Culture' International Symposium." *Huaxia Archaeology*, 2019, no. 4.
- Zhao, Chunqing. "A Review and Reflection on the Study of the Origins of Chinese Civilization." *Southeast Culture*, 2012, no. 3.
- Zhao, Hui. "Research on the Issue of the Origins of Chinese Civilization in Archaeology." Compiled by The Center for Study of Chinese Archaeology in Peking University and Peking University-Aurora Research Center of Ancient Civilization. *The Journal of Ancient Civilizations*, 2003, no. 2.
- Zhu, Naicheng. *Research on the Origins of Chinese Civilization*. Fuzhou: Fujian People's Publishing House, 2006.

—Translated from *Social Sciences in China* (Chinese Edition), 2023, no. 6
Polished by Sally Borthwick