Social integration of religion and ritual in prehistoric China

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The authors employ examples from Chinese prehistory to demonstrate that religion could maintain and reinforce order in various aspects of social lives.

Key-words: China, ritual, funeral treatment, feasting, monument

Introduction
This paper focuses on a discussion of the integrative role of religious ritual. We investigate several archaeological examples selected from prehistoric northern China to demonstrate that the integrative function of religion can be productively monitored through the study of burial treatment, ritualized feasting and monumental structures.

Funeral treatment
The continuation of a social group requires that it respond to the crisis created by the loss of some of its members. Many known mortuary rituals are designed to aid the self-maintenance of social groups. Thus, the practical goal of a mortuary ritual programme is to assist the living toward a smooth transition into a new stage after losing a group member and to reassure social order. In archaeology, when the deceased were carefully and deliberately treated, we can confidently infer that certain rituals had been conducted.

The earliest evidence of intentional burial in China was discovered in 1933 in the Upper Cave locality of the Upper Palaeolithic at Zhokoudian, at about 19,000 BP (see Figure 1 for the locations of the archaeological sites discussed in this paper). The Upper Cave locality was divided into the upper and lower chambers (Jia 1978: 121-2). The upper chamber had an area of about 110 sq. m with a possible hearth located in the centre. This chamber was most likely used as the shelter of a small foraging group. The lower chamber, on the other hand, was used as the burial ground that yielded a total of three complete skulls and a number of human bone elements belonging to a minimum of eight individuals (Wu 1961). The skeletal remains and the surrounding ground were stained with red ochre. Perforated stone beads were found to be associated with the bones. The burials were obviously disturbed, although the agents of disturbance have not been firmly identified. The context indicates intentional disposal and treatment of the deceased. Jia (1978: 122) tentatively argues that secondary burial had been involved. Given the size of the upper chamber, the Upper Cave group must have represented a small group of no more than a few dozen members, comparable to most of the ethnographically known foraging populations. The accumulation of bones from eight individuals would have taken a significant length of time under normal circumstances. If a secondary burial ritual was actually involved, the group might have been concerned about its history and continuation. A secondary burial ritual could solidify the group by reiterating a sense of ancestral membership and their relationship with the deceased. However, a burial ritual performed inside a small cave could only be observable to only a small number of participants, most likely the members of a foraging group.

Burying the deceased in cemeteries became a widespread practice during Neolithic times. The burial practices are so highly varied that clearly several cultural traditions were involved. Our concern here is how mortuary ritual con-


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FIGURE 1. Outline map of China showing the distribution of prehistoric sites.
1 Upper Cave, Zhoukoudian;
2 Shuiquan;
3 Hengzhen; 4 Shijia;
5 Linyanghe;
6 Shijiahe;
7 Baiyinchanghan;
8 Dadiwan;
9 Dongshanzui and Niuheliang.

FIGURE 2. Plan of the Shuiquan cemetery site.
tributed to social integration. The people involved in a mortuary ceremony generally reflect the number of individuals with obligations to the deceased (Binford 1971). In the following, we select two intriguing Neolithic examples that might represent long-term post-burial activities, indicating more deliberate manipulation on the part of the living.

The Shuiquan site in Jiaxian contains a cemetery of 120 burial pits of the late Peiligang Culture in the end of the 6th millennium BC (Zhongguo 1995). The graves were organized so that they were all orientated in an east-west direction (Figure 2). The most obvious pattern is that the graves were divided into two major groups: the eastern and the western groups separated by an unoccupied area. Since the materials recovered from the graves indicate that the eastern and western groups were contemporary, the spatial arrangement is very likely attributable to the social division of the community. We refrain from interpreting these different spatial groups as social groups of families, lineages, clans, moieties, etc., because we cannot test these propositions. The most intriguing feature of the Shuiquan cemetery is a pair of large pits filled with fragments of reddish-brown baked clay. The larger pit, also filled with pebble stones, was located directly in the centre of the burials, between the eastern and the western groups. The smaller pit, which also yielded a fair number of animal bones, was located slightly to the west of the larger pit. We argue that these two pits were used in the ritual activities for the dead, perhaps independent of the funeral ritual. The central locations of the pits suggest that the rites were meant for the solidarity of the whole community, including both the eastern and the western groups. The animal bones could have been sacrificial offerings to the dead, as well as the remains of ritual feasting. If the sacrificial rite was conducted on a regular basis, the Shuiquan people had transformed a crisis ritual pertaining to the loss of group members into a regularly performed calendric ritual. The long-dead were then worshipped as an ancestral cult. Ancestral worship eventually developed into a regular fixture during the latter prehistoric and historic period of China (Liu 2000). The earliest plausible example in archaeology is that of the Shuiquan cemetery.

Our second example of Neolithic mortuary ritual programme derives from the Yangshao Culture. The Yangshao people were sedentary farmers who lived in village communities along the middle reaches of the Yellow River Basin. By the middle of the 4th millennium BC, the Yangshao people started to practise a rite involving multiple secondary burials. The most spectacular example of this practice is the Hengzhen cemetery site, wherein small burial pits were dug into large burial pits. Skeletal remains recovered from an earlier phase of treatment were collected and re-interred collectively in small pits (Kaogu 1984; Figure 3). It is obvious that the prehistoric people intentionally arranged the cemetery in this particular pat-
tern to express difference or similarity in social identities. One of the authors of this paper initiated a biometric distance study of the craniofacial features of the skeletons recovered from the Shijia site, a Yangshao multiple cemetery containing 40 secondary graves and 727 secondary interments (Gao & Lee 1993). The results indicate that the interments of the same grave regardless of sex tend to share more phenotypic characteristics when compared to the interments of the other graves. The placement of the interments in the cemetery was obviously regulated by a biological network. The relationship among the individuals of the same graves was consanguinal rather than affinal; that is, the men and women of the same graves were brothers and sisters, rather than husbands and wives. In addition, the sex ratio of the Shijia cemetery group is biased heavily against the female, the overall female/male ratio being almost 1:2. As the individuals grew older, the bias against females became more exaggerated to 1:5. This bias against the female applies to all other Yangshao multiple secondary burial sites (Liu 2000). The post-marital residence of the respective communities, thus, was more likely to be patrilocal because the out-married women were the first to be alienated from their home villages. Although we can see only the end result in the burials of a presumably elaborated multi-staged ritual programme, we may imagine the endeavour of bringing the remains of the sisters home, the careful placement of the skeletal remains of several dozen individuals into the pits (Figure 4), and the grandiosity of the reburial ceremonies. An obvious question thus is, why? Blood was their concern, even after death. The goal
of the ceremony was to solidify the biologically bounded social group. Assuming that members of the other groups would be able to observe the ceremony, its identity was strengthened by the opposing expression of 'us' versus 'them'.

Ritualized feasting
Feasting is a form of ritual activity that involves the communal consumption of food and drink. Rituals of this kind play many important social, economic, and political roles in the lives of peoples around the world (Dietler 2001). Mortuary ritual feasting is one of the most common feasts in Chinese culture. We can trace this practice several millennia back to the Neolithic times. The earliest example is that of Shuiquan, as discussed above. The Shuiquan feast was most likely offered to the whole community. However, the most common funeral feasting was family- or kin-based. Fung (2000) has innovatively reconstructed the funeral feasting of the Dawenkou Culture during the 3rd millennium BC.

Based on the assumption that vessels used for drinking, serving and preparation were used for feasts that accompanied the burial events of Dawenkou Culture, Fung systematically examined the ritual function of ceramic burial goods and their spatial relationships with the graves of several Dawenkou Culture cemetery sites (Fung 2000). He hypothesizes that the spatial distribution of artefacts within a burial could relate to the possible sequence of disposal and thus can support a reconstruction of the sequences of actions of the funeral rite. His study indicates that there was a formalized pattern of disposal at the Lingyanghe and Hangtou sites. There was an explicit separation between goblets placed near the body and parallel to it and those placed farther away and perpendicular to the body. Fung (2000) interprets the former goblets as offerings to the deceased, and the latter as the results of ritualized drinking by the mourners at the graveside. Consumption of alcohol as a ritual of re-incorporation could be one way in which bonds of solidarity and identity were affirmed at funerals. In this context, the number of goblets on the edge of each grave might provide a clue to the number of participants with drinking privileges at the funeral. In due course, the corporate identity would be expressed and reinforced in the behavioural and the material modes.

Other than funerary feasting, the best example of communal feasting can be found near the town of Shijiahe, Tianmen. In an area of about 3-5 sq. km just north of the town, a cluster of more than 40 sites of the Shijiahe Culture of the second half of the 3rd millennium BC were identified. In the Sanfangwan site, remains of over 10,000 pottery cups densely covered the site (Hubeisheng & Zhongguo 1994). These cups were apparently made specifically for ritual occasions and were probably intentionally smashed as part of the ritual scenario. The workmanship of these cups was so coarse that no specialized production was needed (Figure 5). Apparently each individual, regardless of skill, made and brought his/her own cups for the ceremonial occasions. This proposition is supported by the fact that at the Dengjiawan site, not far north of this pottery cup concentration, a concentration of miniature pottery figurines was found. Several thousand two- to three-inch tall effigies of pig, dog, cattle, sheep, chicken, monkey, elephant, bird, fish, etc., were recovered (Figure 5). Like the ritualized pottery cups, they are comparable to the products of a child's ceramic project rather than a spe-
cialized production. Although we could not reconstruct the exact sequence of the feasting ritual carried out at Shijiahe, we are confident enough to say that it emphasizes communal access and participation during the various phases of the ritual, indicating a strong corporate tendency. Ceremonies of this kind could have served to create alliances and may have functioned as a promotional strategy in regional politics.

Monumental structures
Religious facilities, built by communal or mobilized labour, represent corporate investments, that can create or reinforce social relationships (Hegmon 1989). Monumental structures are important media for the symbolic transmission of information. Their concreteness and invariance are particularly suitable for conveying the messages about basic values and conceptions of the cosmos in a highly redundant fashion (Hegmon 1989). The same message would be emitted repeatedly and continuously, and there is little ambiguity about the message’s meaning. The monumental structures for religious activities of social groups of different size would vary in size and degree of visibility. Small group monuments, such as household shrines, tend to be small in size and low in visibility; they are also hard to identify in archeology. Here we select two examples of small monumental structures to illustrate this point.

The first example comes from Baiyinchanghan, a site of the Xinglongwa Culture dating to the 5th millennium BC. In the centre of a small house feature, a female stone statue was erected by the side of a hearth. Regardless of the speculative interpretations that the statue was a fire or fertility goddess (Guo 1993) or an image of the female ancestor (Song 1995), we may be confident in interpreting it as a small group — such as household, lineage or secret society — shrine.

A second example is that of house feature F411 of the Dadiwan site of the Yangshao Culture, of the 2nd millennium BC. A painting of about 1.2x1.1 m was on the inner half of the house floor (Gansusheng 1986). The painting was partly destroyed, but its major theme is preserved. The remaining painting depicts two standing human figures with crossed legs and a rectangle containing two lizard-like creatures (Figure 6). Again we refrain from conjecture as to the meaning of the painting, yet its religious and symbolic significance is obvious. One of the interpretations provided by Song (1986), which is instrumental to our discussion, suggests that the small size of the house feature — 27 sq. m — indicates that the structure could shelter only one household; thus, the painting was a household shrine. Song further argues that the preserved painting was in pristine state because the house was abandoned soon after the painting was completed. This, Song argues, indicates that the Yangshao people might have practised a custom of abandoning the residence after the death of a family member and that the activity depicted on the painting was a mourning dance. However, we believe that Song’s household shrine proposition is premature; we therefore offer the alternative interpretation that, if the house was not intentionally abandoned soon after the painting was completed, people entering the house would have been careful not to trample it. Given our focus on social integration, the feature, if not used in household ritual, would have been used for other kinds of small group gatherings. Besides their being small in size, our two examples of ceremonial artefacts would have been visually accessible only to individuals who entered the houses. Rituals performed within the walls would be most private and not observable to the outsiders.

In contrast to household monuments, community or inter-community monumental structures were visually accessible to a much larger audience because of their enormous sizes and conspicuous locations. To illustrate this argument, we select the ritual structures of the
Hongshan Culture dating to the second half of the 3rd millennium BC. Archaeologists identified two contemporary monumental sites of the Hongshan Culture — Dongshanzui and Niuheliang — in the 1980s. Although the two sites are 32.5 km from each other, they could be considered roughly as a single unit (Guo 1995). Dongshanzui was located on the centre of a low rising terrace. The surface structure consists of a large square facility of approximately 100 sq. m and a small round structure of about 5 sq. m. Both facilities were carefully lined with stone slabs and pebbles. To the northeast of the round structure a complete human skeleton was found. It is speculated that this might be a human sacrifice. Remains of jade discs, large seated human statues and small figurines of pregnant women were recovered from the site. Judging from the location, the spatial arrangement of features, as well as the presence of non-domestic artefacts, the site differs from the typical living site, and should be interpreted as a ritual facility consisting of two altars (Guo 1995).

Niuheliang is a cluster of sites consisting of one structure compound and at least 13 cairns in the adjacent area. To date, there have been no reports of settlement sites within the bounds of the 8×10-km survey area in Niuheliang (Barnes & Guo 1996). The focus of the cluster is a semi-subterranean temple structure. This structure was located in a prominent position overlooking the basin from midway up a northern hill slope. The multi-chamber structure measured 18.4 m from north to south, while the maximum width was 6.9 m (FIGURE 7). The main chamber was narrow with several chambers arching out from it. Fragments of painted wall plaster suggest that the walls were at least partly decorated. The foundation was a pit foundation about 1 m deep, and the surviving walls began to curve inwards at ground level, suggesting that the ceiling was a curved structure. Given the narrowness of the main chamber and its arched structure, a visitor entering it might have been impressed with a sensation of moving through a tunnel. Inside the buildings were the most astounding discoveries: a clay mask with inlaid jade eyes and teeth, and fragments of at least seven unbaked clay human sculptures. Some of these sculptures represented females, as demonstrated by breast fragments, and all were at least life-size, and some three

times larger (Barnes & Guo 1996). This recovery prompted many archaeologists to interpret the structure as a ‘Goddess Temple’ (Sun & Guo 1986). Additionally, within the vicinity of the structure, 13 cairns associated with as many as two dozen stone tombs were identified. The tombs were of a tiered-stone construction with painted earthenware cylinders lining their edges. Some of the excavated tombs yielded extreme wealth of unusual jade artefacts. The location, the structure and the offerings of the tombs clearly indicate hierarchical ranking among the deceased.

Dongshanzui and Niuheliang were two contemporary inter-community religious centres of the Hongshan Culture. The Dongshanzui altars were most likely built for the ritual worship of the natural forces. The Niuheliang site, with its associated stone tombs, seems to be more closely related to ancestral worship activities. The labour involved in building the facilities might have been mobilized from several communities, thus integrating communities of a broad geographical area. Although the Dongshanzui altars were small in size, given their raised positions, any ritual performed on the open altars could be seen from a distance, facilitating communication to a large audience. In contrast, the so-called ‘Goddess Temple’ emphasized the experience of touring its elongated structure and encountering the ‘goddesses’ in the side chambers. Given its size, access to the temple would have been limited. When the obvious ranking of the tombs is taken into consideration, the temple was probably accessible only to a privileged few. The Niuheliang ritual complex might not only comprise the temple and cairns, for it might have integrated the local landscape as well (Barnes & Guo 1996). Given that the Niuheliang area was void of settlement sites during the Hongshan times, access to this general area might have been restricted and differential. The landscape might have been sacred to the Hongshan people. By analogy with ethnographic cultural groups, the maintenance of sacred landscapes is often supported by myth. If Dongshanzui and Niuheliang can be taken as a single ritual unit, the Hongshan people would have encountered different experiences within this ritual complex. Such a complex would then represent a pyramid of differential experience wherein most people would be able to observe the landscape and the public ceremonies performed on the altars at Dongshanzui, while a few would have the privilege of experiencing the private walk through and encountering the rituals carried out inside the temple at Niuheliang. If our argument of differential access to space can be supported, it also indicates that the elite had successfully transformed the communal religion of the earlier times into a belief system that emphasizes inequality among individuals, probably along kinship lines. The area around Niuheliang might have been regarded by the elite as a sacred landscape that must be, to a certain extent, safeguarded.

Conclusion
The most popular theme in the study of archaeological religion is symbolism. Nevertheless, symbols are cultural constructs for which there are no universally recognized meanings. Many of these studies, particularly in the field of prehistory, are mere intuitive conjectures. By contrast, we concentrate on studying the integrative capacity of religion. Religion can serve as a medium of integration for the smallest social units, such as the household, as well as for large complex societies. By using the examples from Chinese prehistory, we have demonstrated that the social integrative role of religion can be monitored through the study of burial treatment, ritualized feasting and monumental structure. Religion as a cultural institution provided guidelines for the behaviour of the people. Yet, people could actively pursue their own goals through religion. In the process, they might have created new religious practices that served new sociopolitical organization and regional politics.

References
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