Provincial Archaeologies: Material Past of China's Regions

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Introduction

This book explores how regional material records—sites, artifacts, and burial landscapes—allow us to write long-term provincial histories across China. Instead of beginning with dynastic narratives and fitting finds into them, we start on the ground: with sherd scatters on terraces, jade caches in prehistoric mounds, bronzes lifted from riverbeds, lacquered coffins sealed for millennia, and kiln scars etched into hillsides. By treating provinces as analytical frames, we ask how distinct ecologies, resource frontiers, and exchange corridors shaped local trajectories that sometimes converged with, sometimes diverged from, the well-known centers of power.

“Provincial archaeology” here is not a synonym for the periphery. Provinces—broadly the administrative regions known today—are lenses through which we can see the unevenness of historical change. River basins, steppe edges, mountain corridors, and seacoasts generated different constraints and opportunities: bronze-casting traditions in the loess highlands do not mirror jade-working ateliers on the Shandong coast; the port towns of the southeast solved different problems than oases on the far western rim. Each chapter reconstructs a region’s deep history by combining settlement data, craft production evidence, mortuary programs, and traces of ritual practice, always attentive to how people made, used, exchanged, and remembered things.

Methodologically, the volume synthesizes multiple scales of inquiry. We read single artifacts—an inscribed weight, a lacquered cup, a celadon bowl—against site plans, landscape surveys, and inter-regional networks identified through chemical sourcing, metallographic studies, ceramic petrography, and isotopic analyses of human and animal remains. Burial practices receive sustained attention because tombs and cemeteries concentrate materials that reveal social hierarchies, kinship, belief, and political claims. Yet funerary evidence is balanced with habitation sites, workshops, fortifications, and sacred precincts to avoid mistaking mortuary ideals for everyday life.

Chronology is treated as layered rather than linear. Long-term continuities in subsistence or craft can outlast dynastic turnovers, while sudden ruptures—earthquakes, floods, or the redirection of caravan routes—repattern regions in a generation. By tracing these tempos within provinces, we illuminate how local histories assembled the larger story of “China” not as a monolith but as a mosaic of interacting places. The chapters foreground moments when regional material cultures became engines of broader transformation: the diffusion of Chu aesthetics along the middle Yangzi, the maritime technologies of the southeast, or the caravan infrastructures that stitched together the northwest.

Audience matters. The book is written for archaeologists seeking comparative syntheses and for general readers curious about how objects become historical evidence. Technical terms are explained in context, and interpretive debates are presented alongside the finds that motivate them. Rather than treating provinces as containers with fixed essences, we show how boundaries moved, identities shifted, and material signatures traveled with merchants, migrants, officials, and monks.

Finally, a word on scope and limits. Administrative provinces are modern frames; ancient polities and cultural zones rarely mapped neatly onto them. We use provinces as organizing chapters while tracking the cross-border flows—of ores, clays, textiles, ideas—that bind regions together. The goal is not to provincialize the past, but to recover how local worlds made history. Read in sequence or selectively, the chapters invite you to follow artifacts from mines to markets, from workshops to graves, and from provincial landscapes to continental networks, assembling a layered understanding of China’s material past by way of its regions.

CHAPTER ONE: Henan – Foundations of Early States on the Central Plains

The Central Plains of Henan are a land of contradictions. Flat as a rolled-out scroll yet crisscrossed by rivers that surge unpredictably, this region between the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers has long been a cradle of Chinese civilization—and a graveyard of ambitious undertakings. The loess hills that flank the plains hold countless stories, from the earliest millet-farming villages to the charred ruins of imperial capitals. Here, archaeology thrives on the tension between permanence and impermanence, as if the land itself insists on keeping its own counsel about what endures and what vanishes into silt and memory.

Henan's geography is its destiny. The Yellow River, or Huang He, deposits nutrient-rich sediments here before sweeping eastward toward the sea. The Central Plains, stretching roughly from modern Zhengzhou in the north to Xuchang in the south, are a mosaic of alluvial terraces, paleochannels, and wetlands. These landscapes supported Neolithic communities that began experimenting with millet cultivation around 8,000 years ago. Sites like Peiligang, dating to 7,000–5,500 BCE, show early rice and foxtail millet farming alongside hunting and gathering. Pottery shards and stone tools hint at a society transitioning to sedentism, but it is the later Erlitou culture that truly sets the stage for the dramatic transformations to come.

Erlitou, located near modern-day Zhengzhou, is Henan's most contentious and consequential archaeological site. Excavations beginning in the 1950s revealed a sprawling settlement of 200 hectares that flourished between 1,900 and 1,500 BCE. Unlike the contemporaneous Yangshao villages, Erlitou boasted palatial structures, bronze workshops, and a sophisticated water management system. Some scholars argue it represents the remains of the Xia Dynasty, China's semi-legendary first rulers. Others see it as a precursor to the Shang kingdoms, a place where the seeds of urbanism and metallurgy were sown but not yet fully bloomed. The debate lingers because Erlitou lacks clear written records, leaving archaeologists to piece together its story from foundations, slags, and jade drills.

The Shang Dynasty, though, leaves no such ambiguity. In 1,800 BCE, King Tang of Shang founded his capital at Anyang, a city that would become the political and cultural heart of Bronze Age China. The Shang's legacy is etched into oracle bones: scapulae of oxen and turtles that kings inscribed with divination questions, then heated to produce cracks that foretold the future. Over 150,000 of these fragments have been recovered, their characters forming the earliest known Chinese script. At Yin Xu (the ruins of Anyang), archaeologists have found workshops churning out

bronzes that rivaled those of the Near East in complexity. The Shang elites buried themselves in tombs heaped with bronze vessels, jade bi discs, and the bones of sacrificed horses and retainers—a material manifesto of power that would echo through millennia.

But Henan's influence extends beyond its capitals. To the east, the Xiazhou site, claimed to be the legendary birthplace of Yu the Great, who tamed the floods, hints at how environmental myths took root in the physical landscape. The story goes that Yu passed by this spot on his mission to control the Yellow River, and later, Xia emperors would trace their legitimacy to the waters. Whether myth or history, the tale underscores how water management—and its failures—defined statecraft here. When rivers shifted course, settlements were abandoned; when engineers succeeded, cities arose in their place. Henan's people learned early on that their relationship with nature was both collaborative and adversarial.

At Zhouyuan, near modern-day Xi'an (though in Shaanxi, it's relevant here for its influence), the legacy of the Zhou Dynasty began to coalesce. Yet the Zhou's rise was also shaped by their control of Henan's Central Plains. Here, the "Western Zhou" period (1,046–771 BCE) saw the establishment of fortified cities like Fengzhongshi and Qijia, where rulers exercised authority over fertile agricultural lands. The Zhou later claimed the "Mandate of Heaven," arguing that their right to rule derived from moral virtue rather than divine birth. This ideological shift—from the bloodline mysticism of the Shang to a more abstract legitimacy—was perhaps enabled by Henan's role as a crossroads where eastern and western traditions mingled.

Bronze production was a cornerstone of Henan's prehistoric economy. The region's soil contains deposits of copper and tin, and its workshops produced both utilitarian tools and ornate ritual vessels. One of the most iconic finds is the *Da Ding*, or "Big Tripod," a bronze cauldron so massive it took several men to lift. Such objects were not merely ceremonial; they anchored communal feasts and reaffirmed social hierarchies. Metal analyses show that some bronzes originated in distant mines, indicating trade networks that stretched to present-day Sichuan and even Central Asia. In Henan, value was forged in both fire and diplomacy.

Mortuary practices tell another tale of Henan's evolving societies. At sites like Xinzhai and Liyu, elite burials contained grave goods that rival those of Anyang. Jade ornaments, turquoise inlays, and lacquered coffins suggest that mortuary ideologies were not exclusive to capital cities but diffused across the region. A striking example is the tomb of Lady Huang, discovered near Luoyang. Her jade burial suit—stitched together with silver wire—echoes the Han Dynasty's imperial burials but predates them by centuries. Such finds complicate narratives of stylistic progression, showing that Henan's elites were early adopters of sumptuary innovations that later became dynastic norms.

The Central Plains were also a frontier zone. To the west, the Loess Plateau's semi-nomadic peoples interacted with sedentary farmers, exchanging horses and wool for grain and metalwork. At sites like Huanbei, archaeologists have found hybrid artifacts—bronze weapons with steppe-style decorations—that point to cultural fusion. This intermarriage of traditions would later underpin the rise of the Zhou, who leveraged both military prowess (horsemanship) and administrative sophistication (written records) to supplant the Shang. Henan, in this sense, was a laboratory where the blueprints of early Chinese statehood were tested.

Yet for all its innovations, Henan has also been a place of collapse. In 1,267 BCE, the last Shang king, Zhou, was beheaded by the Zhou ruler Wu. But the Shang's downfall was not merely political. Archaeological evidence suggests that prolonged droughts and flooding may have destabilized their agricultural base, leading to economic decline and social unrest. Excavations at Anyang have revealed abandoned workshops and depopulated streets, painting a picture of a city that fell victim to both external conquest and internal decay. Nature, it seems, was as much a player in Henan's drama as human ambition.

The Zhou capital at Fengfeng (near modern-day Baofeng) was more modest than Anyang, reflecting a shift toward decentralization. Instead of a single metropolis, the Zhou established a network of fortified cities, each controlling a stretch of territory. This model—of dispersed authority rather than centralized rule—would influence subsequent Chinese governance. At sites like Wangchenggang and Qishan, archaeologists have found evidence of palatial complexes and ceremonial altars, suggesting that the Zhou blended the ritual grandeur of the Shang with a more localized approach to power.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Henan's archaeology is its role in preserving—and distorting—historical narratives. Confucius, writing centuries after the Shang's fall, used oracle bones to champion the virtue of ancient rulers. But those same bones, when re-excavated in the 20th century, revealed a more nuanced picture of court life. Scholars discovered references to epidemics, famines, and court intrigues that contradicted idealized histories. This tension between ancient and modern interpretations highlights the layered nature of Henan's past, where every generation has sought to rewrite the story using the same fragments.

Henan's tombs also reveal the interplay between local traditions and broader cultural currents. At Mawangdui (though located in Hunan), the burial customs of the Chu people show influences from the Central Plains. Conversely, Henan's own mortuary sites reflect the region's position at the crossroads of northern and southern traditions. The use of jade, bronze vessels, and lacquer work in elite burials suggests that death rituals were a canvas for both innovation and continuity. In this way, Henan's dead became unwitting participants in a grand dialogue about identity and power.

The region’s craft traditions extended beyond bronze. At the Liyu site, archaeologists found kilns producing gray pottery that matched Shang-period ceramics from Anyang. These findings hint at the integration of rural workshops into urban economies, a phenomenon that would become central to later Chinese industrial systems. Similarly, the presence of spinning wheels and bone needles points to textile production that may have supplied both domestic needs and long-distance trade. Henan’s artisans were not just responding to elite demands but shaping the material culture of early states.

Lacquer work, in particular, stands out as a signature craft of Henan. The region’s climate is ideal for the sap-producing sumac trees, and ancient workshops produced lacquered vessels, coffins, and decorative panels that combined functionality with aesthetic sophistication. At the 4,000-year-old tomb of Fu Hao, a Shang queen, archaeologists found a lacquer cup painted with motifs of phoenixes and taotie—that’s face masks—symbols that would later become staples of Chinese art. These objects were not just beautiful; they were ideological tools, conveying messages about order, hierarchy, and cosmic harmony.

The Central Plains also hosted migrations that reshaped their character. During the Zhou Dynasty’s eastern expansion, refugees and exiles flowed into Henan, bringing with them techniques and beliefs from other regions. By the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE), the area was dotted with feudal states, each claiming loyalty to Zhou but pursuing their own agendas. At the Battle of Zhuolu, a legendary conflict between the Yellow Emperor and the Yan Emperor, the land’s mythic status was cemented. Whether historical or not, such tales underscore how Henan’s archaeology is inseparable from its folklore.

Environmental upheavals punctuated Henan’s history. In 1,412 BCE, the Yellow River changed course dramatically, flooding vast areas and forcing the Shang court to flee their capital. The river’s diversion created the “Yellow River Old Channel,” a paleochannel that now preserves layers of ancient settlements. Excavations there have revealed the remnants of villages and cemeteries, their artifacts offering snapshots of life amid ecological chaos. These episodes remind us that Henan’s grand narratives were often written in mud and desperation.

By the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), Henan had become a battleground for Qin, Chu, and other powers. The Qin state, based in modern-day Shaanxi, conquered the Central Plains in 256 BCE, integrating the region into their administrative apparatus. Yet their success here owed much to Henan’s prior development of infrastructure, from canals to fortifications. The Qin’s unification of China was thus both a political and archaeological project, built on foundations laid by earlier inhabitants of this restless land.

The book’s introduction emphasized the importance of looking beyond dynastic histories to understand how regions formed their own identities. In Henan, this means recognizing that early states were not static entities but dynamic experiments in governance, technology, and belief. The bronze workshops of Anyang, the oracle bones that whispered to kings, and the lacquer cups that held ritual wine all contribute to a story of innovation under pressure—a region where the demands of survival and the dreams of power shaped one another in perpetuity.

Through it all, Henan’s archaeology resists easy categorization. It is a place where Shang bronzes sit alongside Neolithic pottery, where myths and material evidence intersect, and where the line between center and periphery blurs. Each artifact, whether a humble tool or a ceremonial vessel, carries the weight of choices made by real people in a landscape that was both nurturing and unforgiving. To study Henan is to appreciate how China’s origins were neither singular nor predetermined but the result of countless local decisions about how to live, die, and be remembered.

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