

RITUAL AND RESIDENTIAL: THE BANG RIVER AND LAOHUSHAN RIVER SURVEYS, AOHAN BANNER, CHIFENG CITY, INNER MONGOLIA, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, the Chifeng region of Inner Mongolia has become an important area in the exploration of the origin of Chinese civilization. This paper reports the results of a recent field project conducted by the author in two river valleys in Chifeng. The residential sites found in the Lower Bang River valley exhibit an obvious settlement hierarchy, which can be regarded as conforming to a typical local chiefdom level polity. The ritual sites found in the Upper Laohushan River valley reinforce the existence of 'sacred places' in the Hongshan period. The author argues that a spatial separation of secular and sacred lives was a most important characteristic of Hongshan societies.

Chifeng is one of the few areas in China where modern archaeology stamped its first footprints (Figure 1). Torii Ryuzo, a famous Japanese archaeologist, travelled through the eastern Mongolian Plateau from 1906 to 1908 and recorded a number of archaeological sites. The Hongshanhou site (Chifeng, Inner Mongolia), after which the well-known Hongshan culture was named, was found in his journey (Torii and Torii 1914). Liang Siyong's 1930 survey along the valley of the Yingjin River was the first work by a Chinese archaeologist in this region (Liang 1959). However, the interest of Chinese archaeologists was soon attracted to the Yellow River valley that had been considered for thousands of years as the only cradle of Chinese civilization.

Little research was done in this 'remote' area till the late 1970s, except for a few field surveys (Guo 1995). It was believed that a so-called microlithic culture, which might have represented the hunter-gatherer and later nomadic people of the northern steppes, dominated this area from the beginning of the Holocene. At about 4500 BC, the Hongshan culture emerged with its elaborate painted pottery, thought then to be the result of strong influence by

the Yangshao culture centred in the middle Yellow River Valley (An 1957; Tong 1961). However, in the 1970s, a series of astonishing discoveries in this 'remote periphery', including large stone tombs with beautiful jade offerings under huge pyramid-like cairns, round and square stone paved altars with human sacrifices, and the so-called Goddess Temple - a complex semi-subterranean structure filled with the fragments of life-size human and animal clay statues - manifested that prehistoric societies in the Chifeng area were even more developed and complex than their counterparts in the middle Yellow River valley.

Furthermore, based on several years of hard field survey, the Inner Mongolia Team of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (IACASS) established a chronological framework for the local archaeological cultures in this area. The Xinglongwa (Aohan, Inner Mongolia) culture (cal. 6200-5200 BC) was set as the starting point of regional Neolithic history (IACASS 1985). Many regional cultural characters, such as tubular pottery vessels, a specific zigzag decorative motif, jade ornaments and pig worship can be traced back to this culture. The succeeding Zhaobaogou (Aohan, Inner Mongolia) culture (cal. 5200-4500 BC) represented a transitional period, during which the zigzag motif was formalized and an elaborate belief system began to emerge (IACASS 1997). The Hongshan culture (cal. 4500-3000 BC) achieved a pinnacle with its exquisite artefacts, large public monumental architecture and complex religious system. But the following Xiaoheyuan (Aohan, Inner Mongolia) culture (cal. 3000 BC-?) exhibited an abrupt collapse, with a decline in site numbers and a sudden change of pottery style (IACASS 1987). For Inner Mongolia, this sequence confirmed an independent developmental trajectory parallel with that in the middle Yellow River Valley.

Therefore, since the 1980s, Chifeng has become an intriguing area that has attracted the attention of archaeologists both within and without China. Since most of

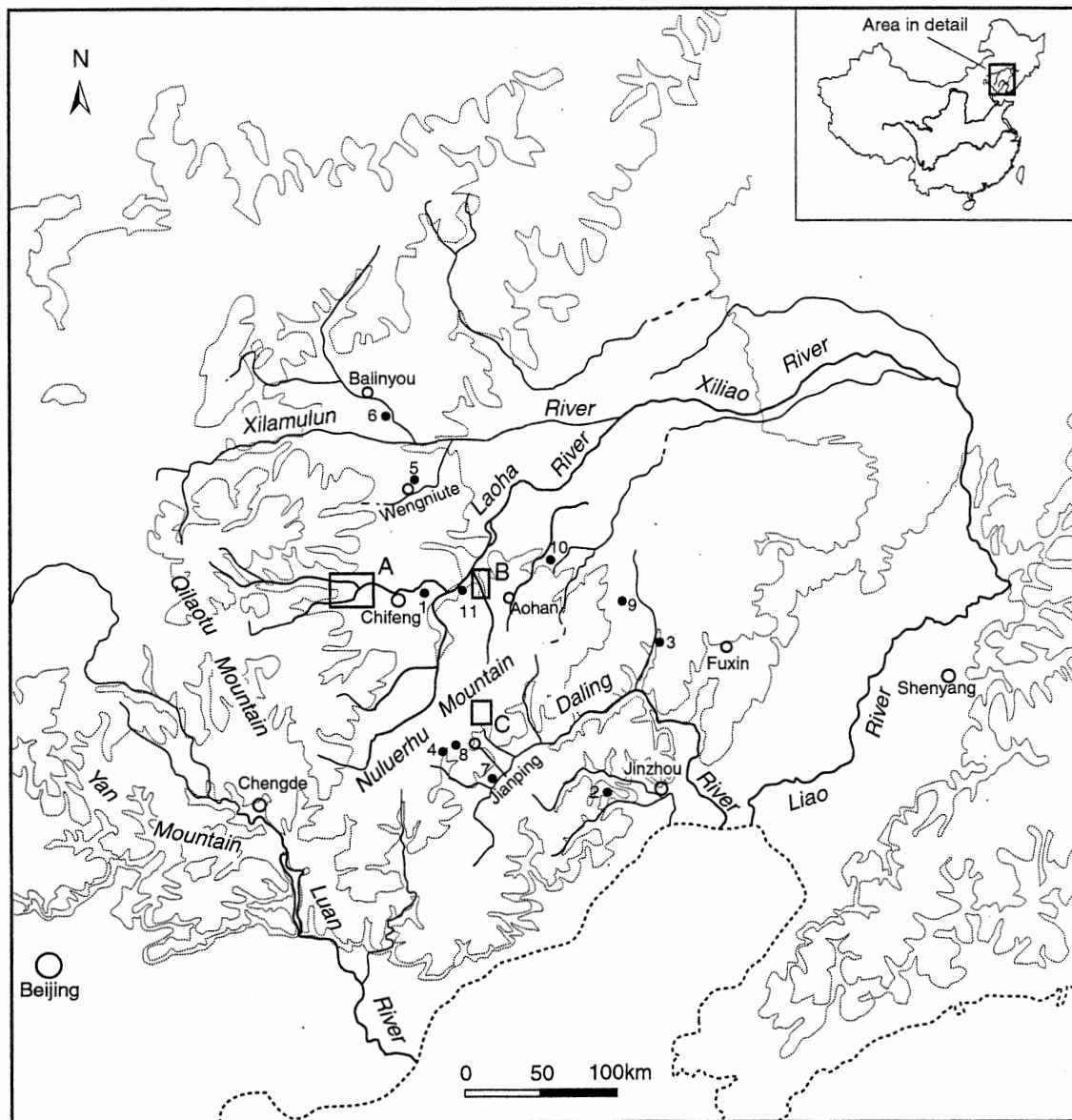


Figure 1: The Chifeng area and its main prehistoric sites.

1. Hongshanhou; 2. Shaguoton; 3. Hutougou; 4. Sanguandianzi; 5. Sanxingta; 6. Nasitai; 7. Dongshanzui; 8. Niuheiliang; 9. Xinglongwa; 10. Zhaobaogou; 11. Xiaoheyang. A. Chifeng; B. Lower Bang Valley; C. Upper Laohushan Valley.

the historic sites are well preserved and easy to recognize during field survey, settlement pattern study is an efficient way to investigate the special developmental trajectory of this area (Shelach 1997; Chifeng Collaborative Archaeological Survey Team 2002; Chifeng International Collaborative Archaeological Research Project 2003). My field survey has been one of several settlement study projects in this area, covering the Lower Bang River valley and the Upper Laohushan River valley in Aohan Banner, Chifeng City, Inner Mongolia. The focus has been on four Neolithic

cultural periods: Xinglongwa, Zhaobaogou, Hongshan and Xiaoheyang.

Originating on the northwest flank of the Nuluerhu mountains in Jianping County, Liaoning province, the Bang River, nearly 70 km long, flows northward and joins the Laoha River to the west of Aohan Banner. My survey covered the Aohan part of the Bang River, which belongs to the modern towns of Sidaowan and Sidetang. Local archaeologists of Liaoning province conducted a survey in the Jianping part of the river in 1981 (Li 1985). By joining their result with my

survey, I have been able to analyse settlement patterns for the relatively circumscribed river valley.

The Laohushan River is a small tributary of the Daling River. Originating from the southeast flank of the Nuluerhu mountains, this 50 km long river flows southeastward, and empties into the Upper Daling River in the suburbs of Chaoyang City, Liaoning province. All the three ritual sites of the Hongshan period recorded in the 1980s Aohan field survey project are located in the upper valley of this river. The purpose of my survey, which covered the Aohan part of the river in the modern town of Sijiazi, was to determine the accurate number of ritual sites and to investigate if there were any residential sites.

The landscapes of the two river valleys can be divided into three geographical zones.

1. Alluvial plains: above the banks of the rivers are intensively cultivated alluvial flats up to 1 km wide. Most modern villages are located along the edge of this zone.
2. Gently sloping loess lands beyond the alluvial plains, 1-5 km wide and extensively cultivated. All the Neolithic sites are located in this zone.
3. Mountains, up to 1000 m above sea level.

The main difference between the two river valleys is that the loess zone of the Laohushan valley is much narrower and has more small hills protruding through it.

Site recognition is easy in this area. At residential sites, it is easy to see artefacts as well as patches of dark soil indicating the locations of semi-subterranean houses. Ritual sites tend to have stone architecture and fragments of the red clay cylinders used in ritual ceremonies. The field crew was divided into two groups, spaced about 100 m apart, each using a high-quality 1:50,000 map. When a site was found, the crew would determine the site limits and collect chronologically diagnostic sherds. Site maps at 1:100 or 1:200 were drawn for most well-preserved and all ritual sites.

THE LOWER BANG VALLEY

Fifty-five Neolithic residential sites were recorded in the Lower Bang River valley, thirty of which were newly recognized (Figure 2). All five recognised sites of the Xinglongwa culture can be dated to the late period of that culture, according to the pottery collected. Rows of semi-subterranean houses indicated by circles of grey earth were found in all the sites. While the low density of Xinglongwa sites is not surprising, the survey results revealed two interesting observations. Site sizes range from 0.3 - 2 ha (Figure 3), and even though the differences might not indicate a real hierarchy, they do demonstrate that some differentiation in site size was initiated from the beginnings of sedentary life in the region. Secondly, all five sites were concentrated in a 4 km long by 1 km wide zone on the left bank of the river. Though it is almost impossible to

demonstrate the exact contemporaneity of the five sites, there is a possibility that they formed a site group, as also recorded for this period in the Mangniu valley survey, Aohan banner (Yang pers. comm. 2000; Liu, G. pers. comm. 2002), and the Banzhijian valley survey, Chifeng City (Chifeng Collaborative Archaeological Survey Team 2002; Chifeng International Collaborative Archaeological Research Project 2003).

Six sites of the Zhaobaogou culture were recorded in the Lower Bang River valley. All can be dated to the middle Zhaobaogou according to the pottery, hence they are likely to be contemporary. Rows of semi-subterranean houses indicated by grey earth circles were recognized at sites 6211, X10 and 6388. At the other sites, we could only gather sherds and stone tools. The Zhaobaogou data reveal only a slight increase in site numbers over Xinglongwa, although the upper limit of site areas increased to 3 ha (Figure 4). The Zhaobaogou sites form two clusters about 10 km apart, the northern including sites X10, 6377, 6388 and 6393, and the southern including sites 6211 and X15. The northern cluster almost overlapped with the distribution of the Xinglongwa sites, but the southern cluster occupied a virgin area. As in the Xinglongwa period, the six Zhaobaogou sites were not equal in size. X10 of the northern cluster and 6211 of the southern cluster are both 3 ha in size, but the other sites were much smaller, from 0.1 - 0.25 ha.

The Lower Bang valley witnessed a dramatic increase in both site size and site number in the Hongshan period. Twentythree sites were recorded in my survey, with a total occupation area of 75.4 ha. All can be dated to the middle Hongshan phase according to their pottery, and could have been contemporary. Site sizes now range from 0.2 - 21 ha, and according to their distributions (Figure 5), assuming all were contemporary, a settlement hierarchy could be attested for the middle Hongshan. Site 6375, at 21 ha, seems to have been a central place, as also might site 6211 (16.8 ha). Sites 6324 (10 ha) and X10 (8 ha) form an intermediate level. All other 19 sites are smaller than 3 ha.

However, things become more complex if we consider the spatial distributions of the sites. There are two groups (Figure 2), the northern one including sites 6324, X2, X9, 6329, 6330, 6332, 6375, 6393, 6373, 6374, 6370, 6388, 6384, X11, X10 and X12. Site 6375 is the central site of this group, while 6324 and X10 are secondary sites. The southern group includes sites X13, 6212, 6211, X14, 6351, X15 and 6310, with site 6211, located 9 km from site 6375, being the central site. It seems that the two groups were relatively independent.

The rank-size distribution of the 23 sites is clearly convex in its upper portion (Figure 6). The relatively flat line connecting the largest (6375) and the second largest (6211) sites indicates that the second-level site 6211 is obviously

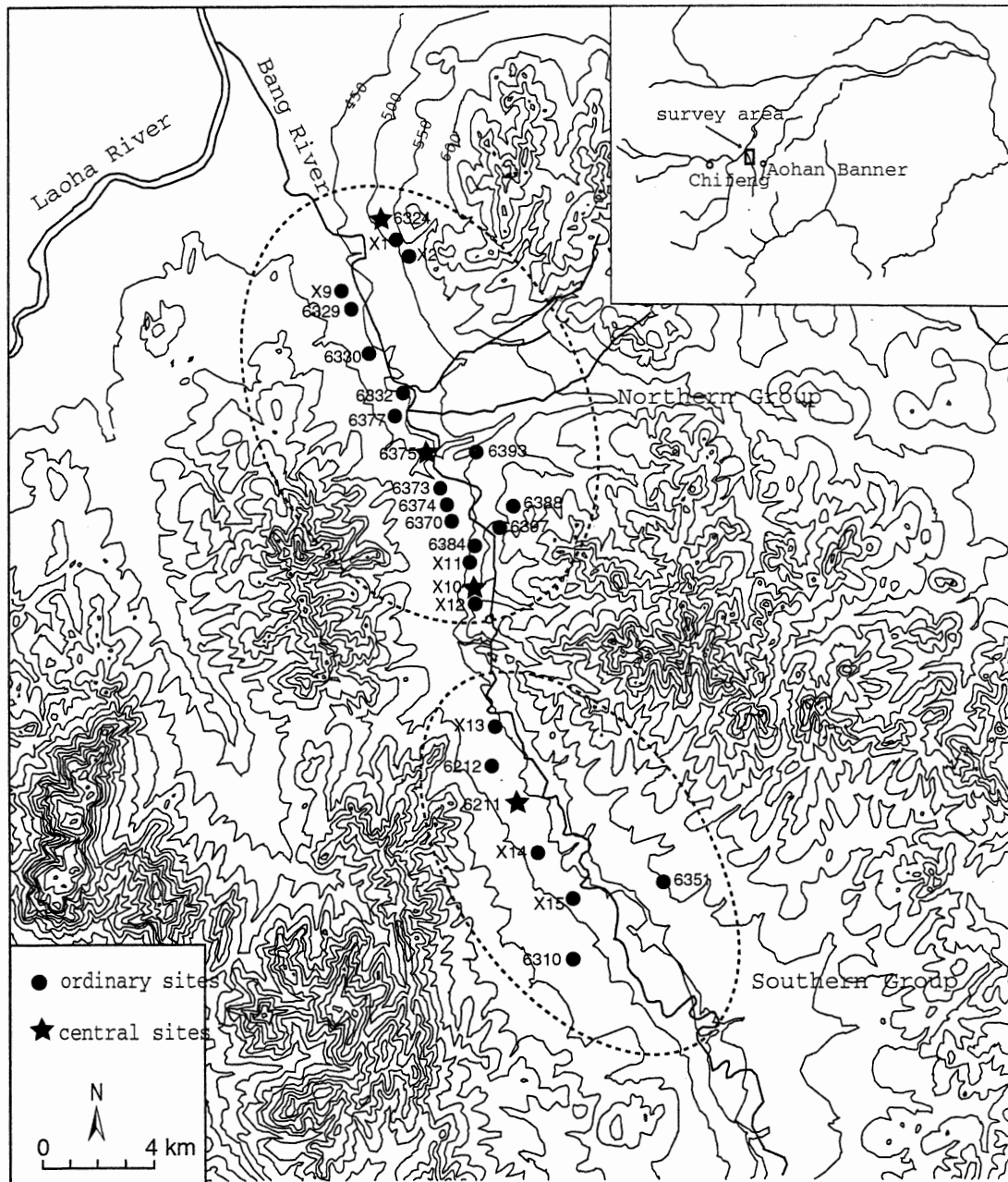


Figure 2: The distribution of Hongshan sites in the Lower Bang Valley.

larger than the ideal log-normal model for a central place distribution would predict. As Johnson (1977, 1980, 1981) has argued, systems characterized by a relatively low degree of integration should exhibit convex rank-size distributions. This tends to support relative autonomy between the two site groups. However, considering that there is only a 3 km buffer zone between the two groups, and site 6375 is more than 4 ha larger than site 6211, I consider the 23 sites as one polity, with 6375 as the central site.

During the Xiaoheyuan period, settlements declined dramatically both in number and size compared to the Hongshan period. Only four Xiaoheyuan sites were recorded in the Lower Bang valley, the largest only 1.5 ha. As Figure 7 shows, though they differ in size, there is no clear settlement hierarchy. The survey data in the Middle Bangzhijian valley provide analogous results (Chifengkaogudui 2002).

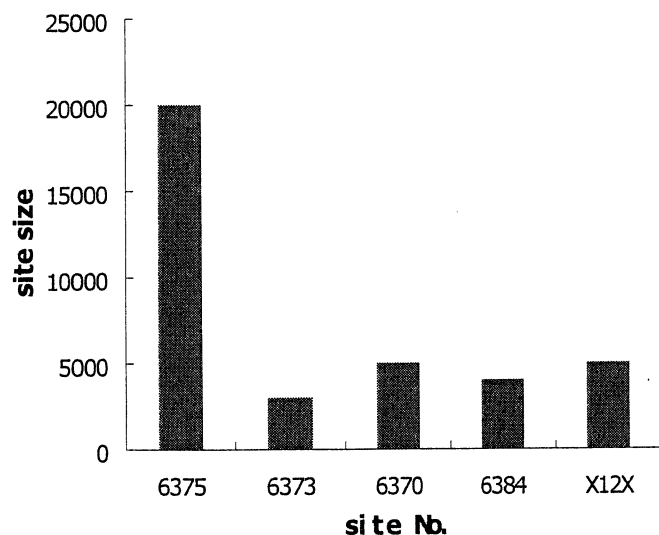


Figure 3: Areas (square metres) of Xinglongwa sites in the Lower Bang Valley.

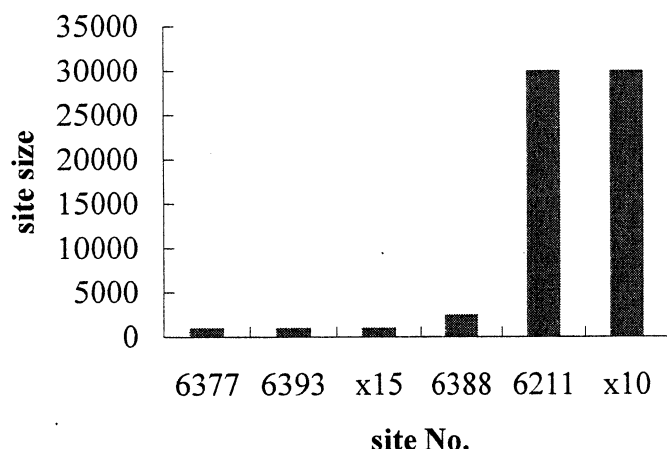


Figure 4: Areas (square metres) of Zhaobaogou sites in the Lower Bang Valley

THE UPPER LAOHUSHAN VALLEY

Twenty-two Neolithic sites, including 11 newly recognized ones, were recorded in the Upper Laohushan River valley. The most significant discoveries were the five altars and three cairns located in an area of 16 x 5 km² (Figure 8), all dated to the middle Hongshan phase. These ritual sites cluster in four pairs. The Xiaogulitu site complex (4511) is situated to the north. Sites 4838, a rectangular stone faced altar, and 4841, a cemetery consisting of two cairns, lie about 1 km to the south. Sites 4938 and X19 are two stone faced altars on opposite sides of the river. The last pair - X20 and

4906 - are located on a tributary of the Laohushan River. Though smaller and less elaborate than their counterparts at the famous Niuheiliang site, these ritual sites can provide new understanding of the Hongshan ritual system.

For instance, the Niuxihe altar (4938) is located in an alluvial plain, whereas the others are located on sloping terrain. The Xiaogulitu altar (4511) is shaped like the under shell of a tortoise (Figure 9), and measures 72 x 43 m from the north to the south. It is surrounded by a stone wall which is 30 cm in height. A turtle cult of some form appears to have been present in the Huai valley as early as the Peiligang period (cal. 6500 - 5000 BC) (Gao and Shao 1986), and tortoise shells were found with some burials at Jiahu (cal. 6500 - 5500 BC) (Henansheng 1999). Though they might have been used as rattles during ritual dances (Liu 1994:107-112; Chen 2003), one of the reasons why turtle shells were chosen might have been that the Peiligang people had already developed the 'round heaven, square earth' belief and regarded the turtle's body as a natural model of the universe. The concept, which believed that the square earth is covered by the round vault-like heaven, remained in fashion throughout Chinese prehistory, according to Allan (1991)

Five other Hongshan sites were recorded in the Upper Laohushan valley, but only X18 has traces of subterranean houses. Other sites contained only surface sherds. Thus, the Upper Laohushan valley, like Niuheiliang, can perhaps be regarded as a sacred place apart from everyday residential usage. The famous Niuheiliang site is the largest Hongshan ritual complex in existence according to current data (Figure 10). About 20 locations dating to the late Hongshan phase occur on adjacent promontories within an area of about 5 x 10 km (Guo 1997). The location NI, which occupied the highest location on the slope of Niuheiliang hill, on the northern side of the complex, seems to have been the centre of the ritual complex. This was the location of the 'goddess temple', and was surrounded by at least 13 cairns and altar clusters to the south, west and east.

Opposite the Niuheiliang complex, there lies a low mountain shaped like a sleeping animal. The regional archaeologists bestowed upon it the name 'Boar Mountain' or 'Bear Mountain', and suggested that it was celebrated as a sacred animal form in antiquity (Barnes and Guo 1996; Guo 1997). No residential sites have been found within an area of more than 100 km² surrounding the Niuheiliang complex (Guo 1997), suggesting that it was an exclusive sacred place separated from everyday secular life. Significantly, both Niuheiliang and the Upper Laohushan ritual complexes are in the upper drainage of the Daling River and its tributaries - an undulating region with high mountains and small hills. It was obviously not an ideal place for the Hongshan people to cultivate crops, but it might have been

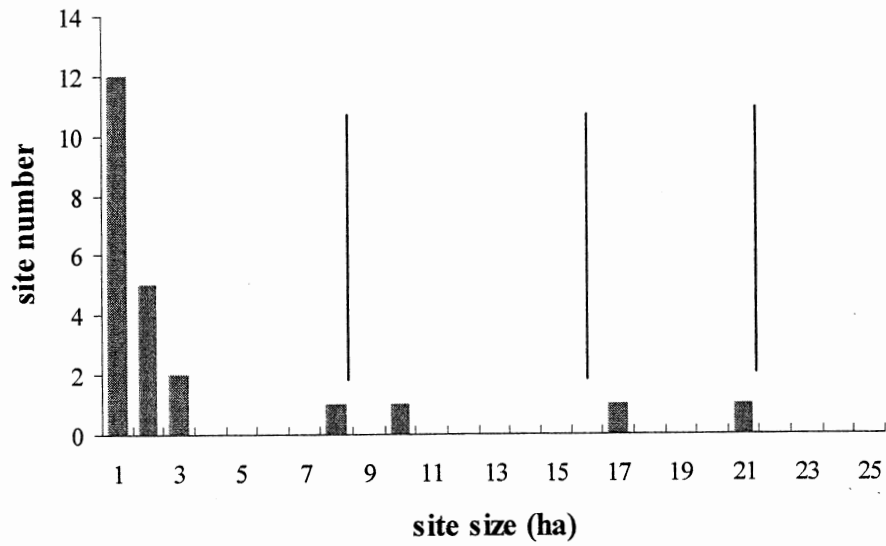


Figure 5: Areas (square metres) of middle Hongshan sites in the Lower Bang Valley

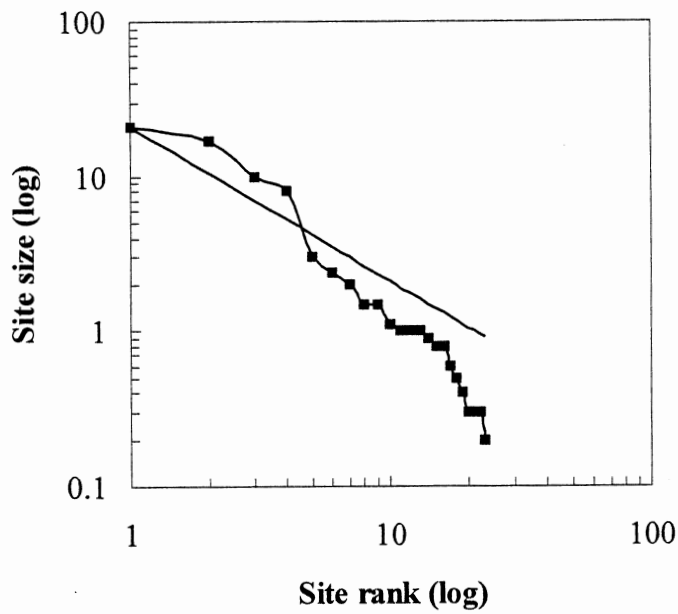


Figure 6: Rank-size distribution for 23 Hongshan sites in the Lower Bang valley.

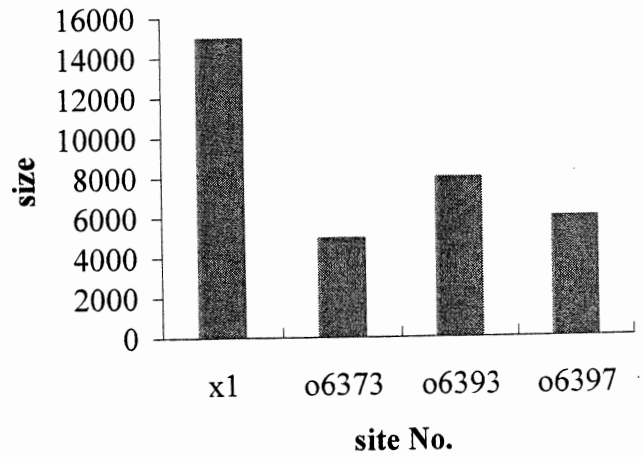


Figure 7: Areas (square metres) of Xiaoheyuan sites in the Lower Bang valley.

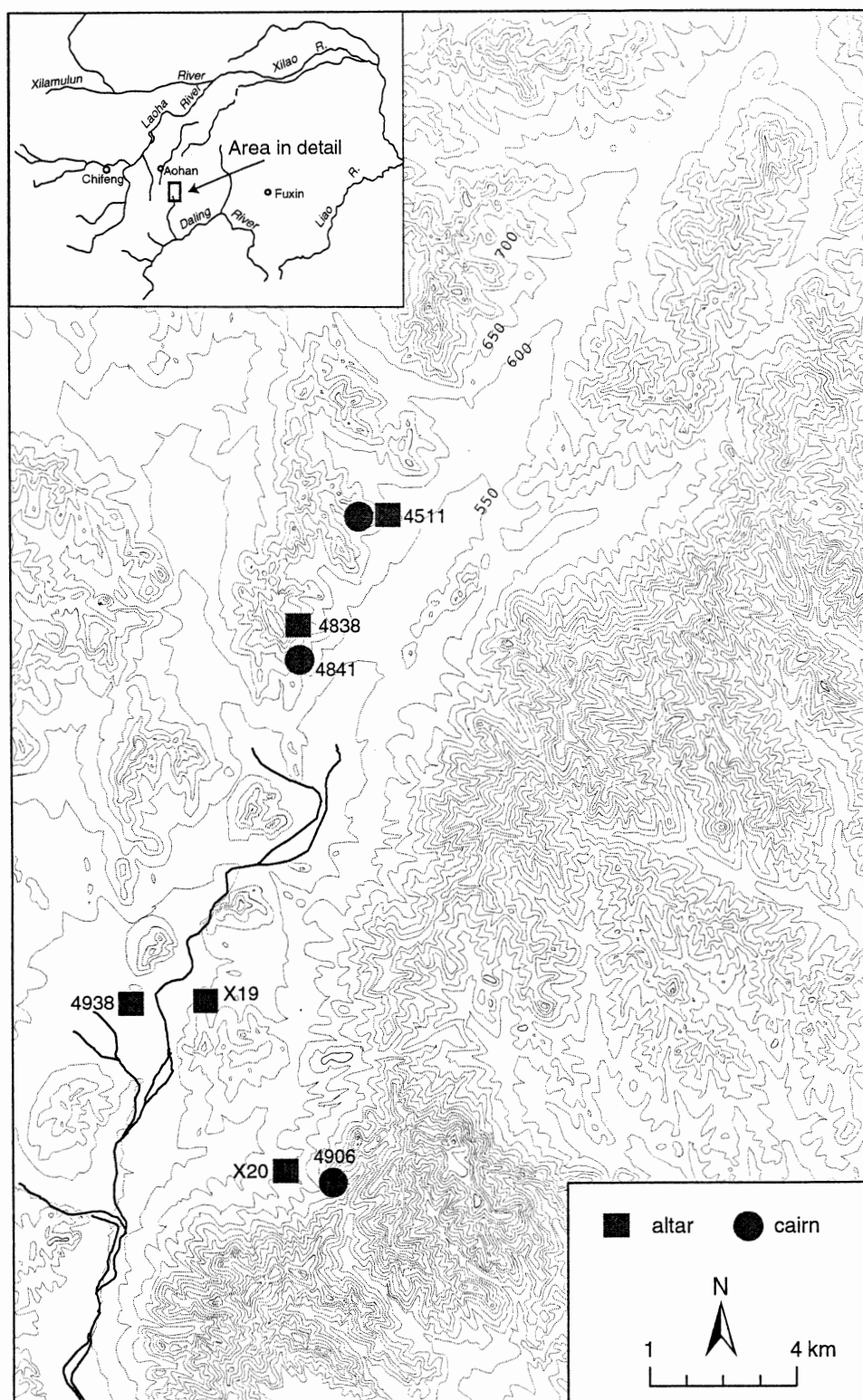


Figure 8: Hongshan altars and cairns in the Upper Laohushan valley.

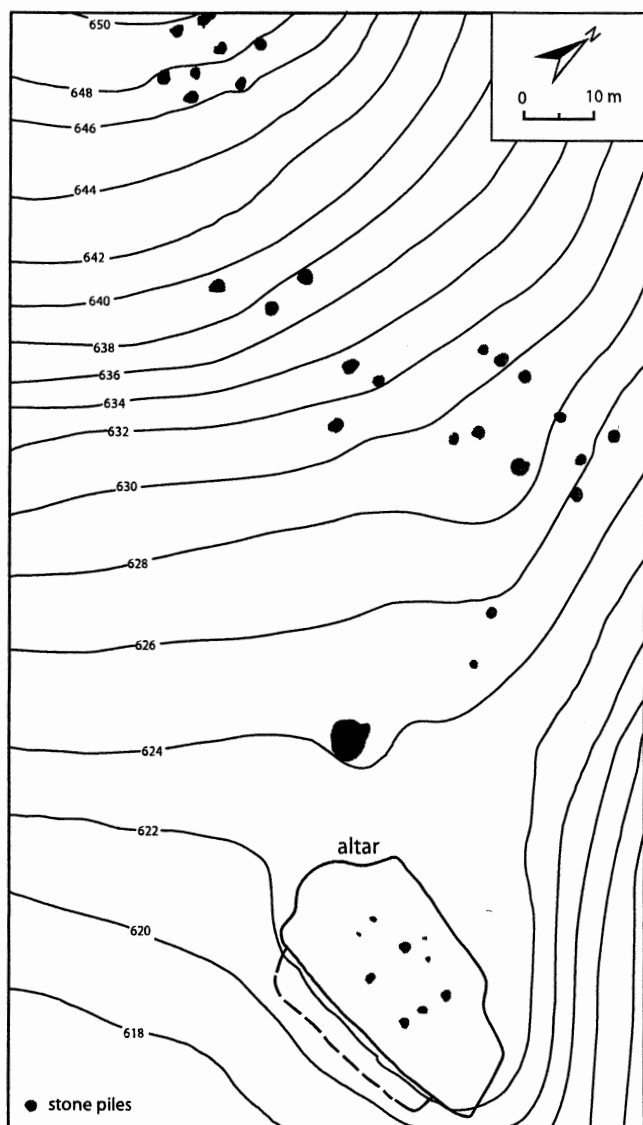


Figure 9: The Xiaogulitu altar, Upper Laohushan valley.

an ideal landscape for them to escape from secular life and practise sacred ceremonies.

CONCLUSION: RITUAL AND RESIDENTIAL

The residential sites found in the Lower Bang valley exhibit an obvious settlement hierarchy. In terms of archaeological theory, a chiefdom will include a large centre, with lower-ranked settlements surrounding it (Wright 1984; Earle 1987, 1991). The rank-size plot of the 23 located sites demonstrates a relatively low degree of integration of the two recognised groups, and it is suggested that site 6375 was the central site of the whole polity, with 6211 as a subsidiary site. Wright (1984) suggested that the central place of each complex

chiefdom should be architecturally differentiated from ordinary settlements, but no such differences were recognized from surface survey alone.

Secondly, the relatively circumscribed environment of the Lower Bang valley indicates that the settlements discovered there formed an independent polity. The high mountains to east and west and the Laoha valley to the north offered territorial boundaries, and to the south there is a gap of 8 km without identified Hongshan sites. Thus, the total area of the polity is estimated to have been about 200 km².

Though the settlement hierarchy of residential sites indicates that local chiefdoms might have been the highest-level polities in the Hongshan period, the characteristics of the ritual sites suggest greater complexity in the late Hongshan. Nelson (1998) estimated that ritual centres like Niheliang could have been supported by hundreds of villages. These ritual complexes were located far from the residential settlements, and might have served supra-regional integrative roles in community ritual (Yu *et al.* 1984). One could perhaps refer in this context to a 'chiefdom coalition', an intriguing topic in the future study of the Hongshan culture.

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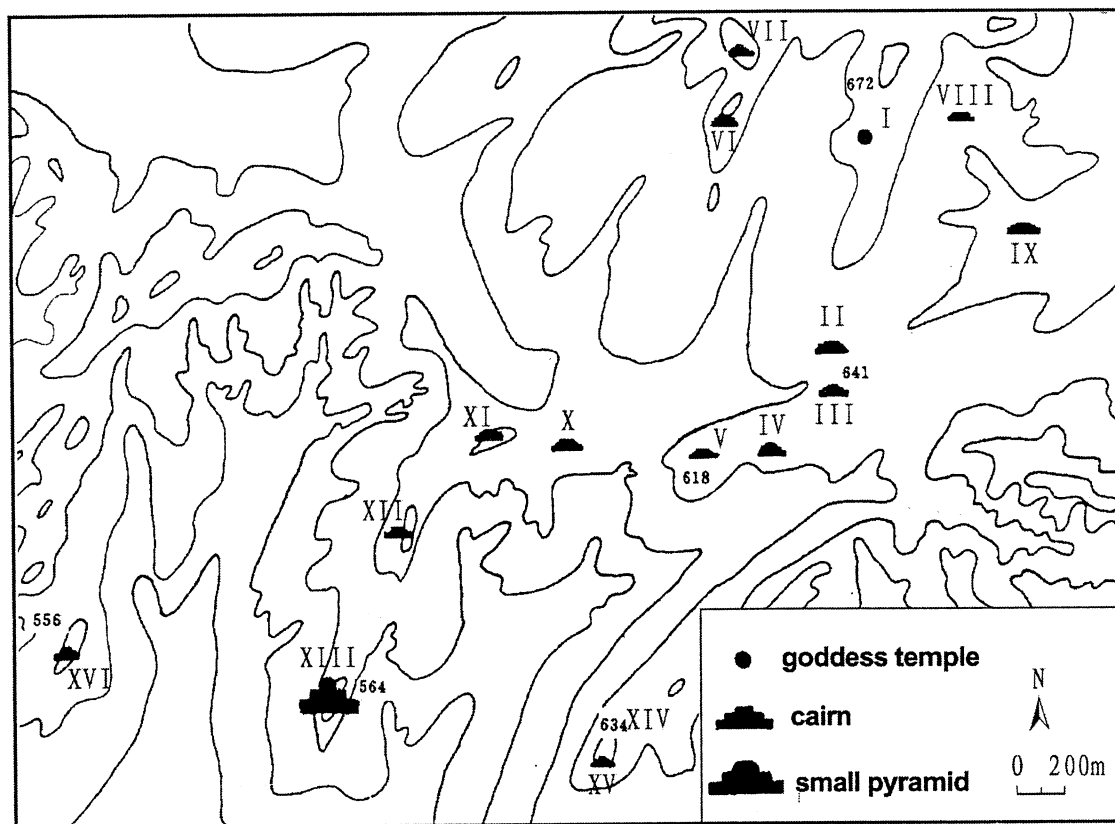


Figure 10: Plan of the Niuheliang ritual complex (after Guo 1997: Figure 2).

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