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**THEORETICAL APPROACHES
TO THE EMPLACEMENT OF RELIGION**

edited by

Claudia Moser and Cecelia Feldman

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Back cover: Sacrificial procession on the frieze of the monument of Domitius Ahenobarbus (Rome, end of the 2nd century B.C.).

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The Sacred Houses in Neolithic Wansan Society

CHIH-HUA CHIANG AND YI-CHANG LIU

This paper explores the multifaceted meanings of the houses in Neolithic Wansan society in Taiwan. We argue that the houses in the Wansan society might provide an example with which to challenge the common approach in archaeological research of viewing sacred and profane spaces as distinct from each other (Bradley 2003). The Neolithic Wansan society is situated in the northeastern part of Taiwan (Figure 8.1). The excavation of the site reveals the presence of houses and numerous utilitarian artifacts related to people's daily lives. More importantly, archaeological evidence of the mortuary practice, the burials, has also been recovered in proximity to these residential houses. Based on ethnographic research, mortuary rituals are often closely associated with the practice of ancestral worship (Bloch 1995; Waterson 1990). The Wansan example thus offers archaeologists an opportunity to explore possible ritualistic meanings of the houses.

The perspective which regards sacred space as being set apart from domestic areas in the landscape not only distorts scholars' understandings of prehistoric society by projecting current social conditions on the past, but also impedes scholars from exploring the process of how people interact with the landscape and construct their sense of the place both through ritual and daily practices in the domestic sphere. Increasingly, investigations of several ancient societies have revealed that the domestic sphere was often imbued with sacred power by the performance of the so-called "domestic rituals" (Bradley 2003, 2005; Gonlin and Lohse 2007; Plunket 2002). Richard Bradley argues about prehistoric domestic spaces in Europe that:

This scheme is entirely a product of modern assumptions about the past in which ritual and religious belief are separated from the everyday. As the settlements of the British Iron Age show, that need not be the case. There seems no reason to insist that shrines should have been set apart from domestic buildings or that they should have been located at conspicuous points in the landscape [Bradley 2003: 11].



Figure 8.1 Geographical location of the Wansan site (image by authors)

In this paper, we use the example of Wansan society to illustrate that houses play important roles both in peoples' daily and ritual lives. First, we introduce the concept of house society (developed from rich ethnographic research) to demonstrate that, in some societies, houses can be more than simply physical structures for providing protection. Houses can also be places where important ritual activity is practiced and where the ancestors reside. A house also constitutes a focal point of economic, social, ritual, and political life. The ample ethnographic work conducted in these house societies offers archaeologists an interpretive framework with which to explore the possible ritual meanings of residential houses (e.g., Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1993; Fox 1993; McKinnon 1991; Waterson 1990). We utilize these ethnographic examples, especially the discussion of the close link between mortuary rituals and ancestral worship, to explore sacred aspects of houses in prehistoric Wansan society through examining the spatial association of possible house structures, mortuary practices, and utilitarian artifacts. Our research on this small-scale Neolithic settlement is a testament to the fact that the separation

of domestic and sacred needs to be re-examined and cannot be automatically assumed in archaeological research. To the Wansan people, the landscape they engaged with on a daily basis consisted of both profane and sacred meanings where ritual and daily practices were spatially and conceptually intertwined.

House Society: the Sacred House

The concept of the house society developed within socio-cultural anthropology is both the inspiration of our study of prehistoric Wansan society and simultaneously its point of departure. Originally proposed by Lévi-Strauss in the 1970s, a house is defined as:

a corporate body holding an estate made up of material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its names, its goods, and its titles down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity and, most often, both [1982: 174].

Although Lévi-Strauss' original attempt is to offer another social form to categorize societies without clear kinship systems, his proposal opened up a new field of research. This new understanding of the importance of physical houses in the process of social formation has redirected anthropologists' attention toward exploring the various roles that houses can play in human social and ritual life (Beck 2007; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Gillespie and Joyce 2000; Sparkes and Howell 2003). The most promising research for this study is a series of ethnographic work conducted in the Austronesian-speaking societies¹ in Southeast Asia.

In these Austronesian-speaking societies, the house is the prominent feature of the landscape in terms of both its social function and its ritual significance. As defined by Lévi-Strauss (1987: 152), the house possesses a domain consisting of material and immaterial wealth and even includes goods of supernatural origin. As in the Kalauna houses in Papua New Guinea, the fist-sized black stones stored inside the house are considered to be inhabited by ancestral spirits (Young 1993). In several Austronesian-speaking societies, the house is thus often regarded as a "repository of ancestral objects that provide physical evidence of a specific continuity with the past" (Fox 1993: 1). More specifically, as Fox (1993) illustrated, certain structures inside the house, such as certain posts, beams, altars, and platforms are activated as "ritual attractors" where rituals are routinely performed to signify their close connection with the ancestors of the houses (see also McKinnon 1987, 1995).

In addition, the Austronesian houses are often regarded as living things, and the characteristics of the house are often expressed in anthropomorphic terms in local languages (Ellen 1986: 26; Fox 1993; Waterson 1990). As a living entity, the house passes through different stages of the life cycle, which is emphasized in terms of various ritual ceremonies. In the Iban longhouse in Indonesia, for example, “space is transformed by rituals of birth and death from the familiar mundane setting of everyday social life to a symbolically organized landscape, displaying basic social distinctions and mirroring a series of superimposed realities, both seen and unseen” (Sather 1993: 103). In other words, this physical house structure becomes more than a shelter for people’s daily activities. It is also a place infused with multiple meanings and where rituals are constantly performed.

The house is viewed as incorporating multiple facets of human daily life (e.g., economic, ritual, social, and political) (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Fox 1993; McKinnon 1991; Sparkes and Howell 2003), this challenges traditional assumptions that the uses and meanings of residential houses are always excluded from the sacred realm. Based on ethnographic research, various activities closely related to the formation and continuation of social house groups can be recognized as ritual actions which can be observed archaeologically – the placement of deceased ancestors associated with residential structures (e.g., Chesson 1999; Düring 2007; Lopiparo 2007), the building and rebuilding processes of house structures (e.g., Gerritsen 2007; Tringham 2000), and objects possibly related to rituals such as ceramic vessels (e.g., Chiu 2003; 2005; Heitman 2007; Lopiparo 2007).

Among these house-related practices mentioned above, in this paper we focus on the relationship between the space of people’s daily activities and the place where they bury their ancestors. The ethnographic work conducted in the house societies indicates that one of the most significant ritual activities is the one that emphasizes the connection to the house ancestors, especially mortuary rituals. Ethnographic research on several Austronesian-speaking societies reveals how the ritual recognition of ancestors is tied to the construction of social identity and the delimitation of a corporate group. These rituals can occur at the level of an entire community, but also for individual residential groups (Adams 2005; Waterson 1990). Waterson (1990: 209) also observes that in several societies, the sense of closeness between the living members with the house ancestors is prominent. One of the common practices was to bury the deceased house members inside or in close physical association with domestic houses. For the house members, the deceased were often transformed into ancestors; and burials in close proximity to the domestic sphere can serve as a reference point to maintain the spatial continuity between the living house members and their ancestors

(Grove and Gillespie 2002: 13). Gillespie concludes that:

The deposition of burials or parts of human remains on house land, with or without the building of elaborate tombs, and the use of heirloomed costume ornaments and other valuables that are indexical signs of ancestral personages are means by which archaeologists can demonstrate the perpetuation of the house [Gillespie 2007: 35].

The continuous existence of the social house-group is reinforced by the group's claim of connection with the house ancestors. Through referencing these indexical signs, this strong presence of ancestors in the house, thus, can transform an ordinary house into a place with sacred power.

Sacred Houses in Taiwan

The close relationship between residential houses and burials is evident in most of the archaeological sites in Taiwan. This particular relationship has survived for thousands of years in Taiwan. The distribution of burials in several prehistoric societies is closely associated with the houses – either under the house floors, such as at Peinan (Lien 2008) and Ciyubing sites (Chen 1994), or around the houses, such as at the Wansan site (Liu 2000, 2002).

In addition, the practice of burying the deceased family members inside or close to the house has also been an important tradition in most of the indigenous societies of Taiwan until the early twentieth century. The earliest evidence of this practice in Taiwan can be traced back to the first Neolithic culture, the Tapenkeng culture, around 5,000 years ago (Tsang et al. 2006). Although the deeper meaning and significance of this practice in prehistoric Taiwanese societies has not yet been explored, ethnographers have already pointed out the apparent relationship between the house and burials in several Taiwanese indigenous societies. As in the contemporary Bunun society in central Taiwan, Huang (1986: 380) argues that “family members confirm their right to inherit the land by burying their deceased members inside the house. Their house represents the society, and the acquiring of the house signifies their identity in the society.” His observation resonates with the understanding of other Austronesian-speaking societies in Southeast Asia where the ritual recognition of the ancestor is connected with the demarcation of a corporate group and the creation of social identity.

Furthermore, the members of contemporary Paiwan society, another indigenous society in Southern Taiwan, also connect with the past by burying their deceased members inside the houses in which they are still living (Chiang 1999: 383). These house members demonstrate their claim to house property ownership by making the connection with its past through

the burying of deceased relatives inside the house floor. Thus, the continuity of the house and the lineage of the family that resided in the house are sealed through this process.

These aforementioned archaeological and ethnographic examples clearly demonstrate a close connection between houses, burials, and ancestors in Taiwan. The house society concept thus offers a framework within which to explore the possible multifaceted meanings of houses in prehistoric Wansan society. In the following sections, we examine the importance of the ritual and domestic roles that the houses play in prehistoric times. As discussed above, burials associated with houses signify important ritualistic practices that are intended to highlight the connection between the living and the dead. More importantly, this act of placing the deceased house members around Wansan houses enhances the sanctity of the houses themselves and possibly transforms the residential houses into “holy houses” (e.g., Kirch 2000).

The second role of the house that we will analyze is its domestic aspect. The artifacts associated with daily life include various tools and ceramic vessels at the Wansan site. The discovery of these utilitarian objects on the site implies that this is where the occupants conducted their daily lives. Thus, it is now necessary to examine the types of activities the residents of each house might carry out regularly.

The Wansan Society

The Wansan site is located on an isolated hill in the northeastern part of Taiwan facing the Pacific Ocean. The main habitation area, where an abundance of artifacts were concentrated, is towards the top of the hill where the terrain is flatter. The site has been excavated several times in the 1990s, generating 39 radiocarbon dates which suggest that it was occupied from 3,700 to 2,700 years ago (Liu 2000, 2002).²

The Sacred Houses

At the Wansan site there is no definitive evidence for standing structures which can be identified as houses. Therefore, we established the presence of houses based on the distribution of the postholes as indicators of dwellings at the Wansan site. According to ethnographic work conducted on indigenous architecture in Taiwan, there are three types of residential dwellings: the pile-dwelling, the ground building, and the semi-subterranean dwelling (Chijiwa 1960). Regardless of which of the three common types of residential houses are constructed, wooden posts are the basic, common,

consistent component of all the three types of domestic architecture. After setting up the wooden posts as the main structure, different materials are used to assemble each dwelling. Therefore, when clusters of postholes are uncovered from archaeological sites, they are considered to be indications of the existence of houses.

Two possible mortuary practices have been uncovered from the Wansan site (both practices involving exotic goods). One practice was to place the corpse inside a box-shaped container made out of slate. The second type of practice was to position the body of the deceased in a large jar. Although only two forms of burial practices have been identified, there are variations within these practices in terms of the shape and size of the object used for deposition. The slate used to construct the container is imported from neighboring mountains, and the source of the clay to make the jar burial is also located outside of the Wansan hill. Both of the materials for creating slate coffins and jar burials were exotic to the local Wansan people. Consequently, the preparation and actual burying activities required certain efforts for the arrangement and organization of the mortuary practice. Also, the presence of certain grave goods carrying symbolic meanings further enhanced the importance of this process, such as the presence of a jade zoo-anthropomorphic object. As mentioned above, the dead person was probably converted into an ancestor as a result of mortuary rituals, and the burials within or adjacent to the houses could create spatial proximity between the living house members and their ancestors (Grove and Gillespie 2002; Waterson 1993, 2000). Therefore, we argue that the burials at the Wansan site could serve as a significant place for ancestral ritual activity.

In order to examine the relationship between the houses and burials, we superimposed the distribution of postholes, stone coffins, and jar burials on the same map (Figure 8.2). Since the presence of postholes can be used to argue for the presence of house structures, several posthole clusters can be identified as areas where a group of ancient house structures might have been constructed. Once the location of houses has been established, it is possible to identify a pattern of burials positioned to encircle the houses.

The lack of standing architecture for house structures impedes archaeologists from examining whether people practiced any intentional house modification or demolition at the Wansan site. Nevertheless, the spatial association of posthole clusters with burials illustrates that prehistoric Wansan people not only utilized the same location for constructing the houses over hundreds of years, but also intentionally placed their deceased members in close proximity to their houses. In other words, houses were not building structures meant to provide the living inhabitants with shelter. The houses were also places for connecting the ancestors to the living members of the house.

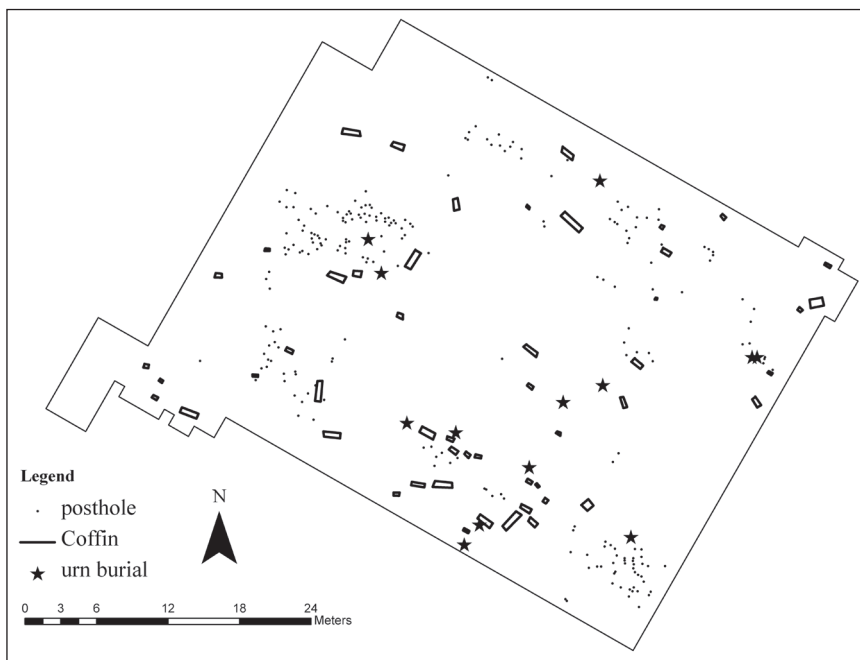


Figure 8.2 Distribution of the burials and postholes at the Wansan site (image by authors)

Furthermore, assembling slate coffins and making jars for the dead suggests a series of decision-making processes and negotiations between individuals and groups. For example, the materials to make the coffins and jars are not locally available; thus, the descendents of the deceased had to travel and exchange with other societies to acquire the proper materials. The time and energy spent on preparing and conducting the mortuary rituals signified the importance of the ancestral veneration in the society. Unlike their houses built from perishable materials, these stones and jars used for burials were made from durable materials which lasted much longer than the houses. While these houses might deteriorate after abandonment, the permanent marker, burials, served as enduring evidence of the presence of the ancestors. In prehistoric Wansan society, a house must have been a prominent feature of the landscape for the living like it is in other Austronesian societies in Taiwan and Southeast Asia. These houses, which members could encounter on a daily basis, not only stood out in the landscape, but also the mortuary rituals conducted around the houses further infused this landscape with spiritual power where the ancestors were omnipresent.

The Residential Houses

The excavation of the Wansan site not only uncovered several burials and postholes, but also unearthed abundant pottery and lithic artifacts, including storing, cooking, and serving vessels and a variety of weaving, hunting, fishing, farming, and tool production equipment. All of these artifacts are closely related to daily activities. Based on the lithic assemblages, the Wansan people practiced hunting, fishing, wood-working, land clearing, and harvesting activities. Also a variety of ornaments, such as bracelets, earrings, and necklaces played an important role in their daily life. Moreover, the concentration of artifacts implies that prehistoric Wansan people discarded their broken vessels and tools in certain areas close to the houses. Even though these “dumping” areas were probably outside of the houses, they are still quite near the houses. The types of discarded artifacts associated with each house revealed the possible activities that occurred within the houses. To explore whether these identified localities for house construction are also where people conducted the activities of their daily lives, we distinguished and compared the concentrations of lithic and ceramic artifacts (Figure 8.3). Each artifact concentration is associated with the different possible house localities (identified in the previous section) and is named according to locality – I, II, III, IV, V, and VI, respectively. Figure

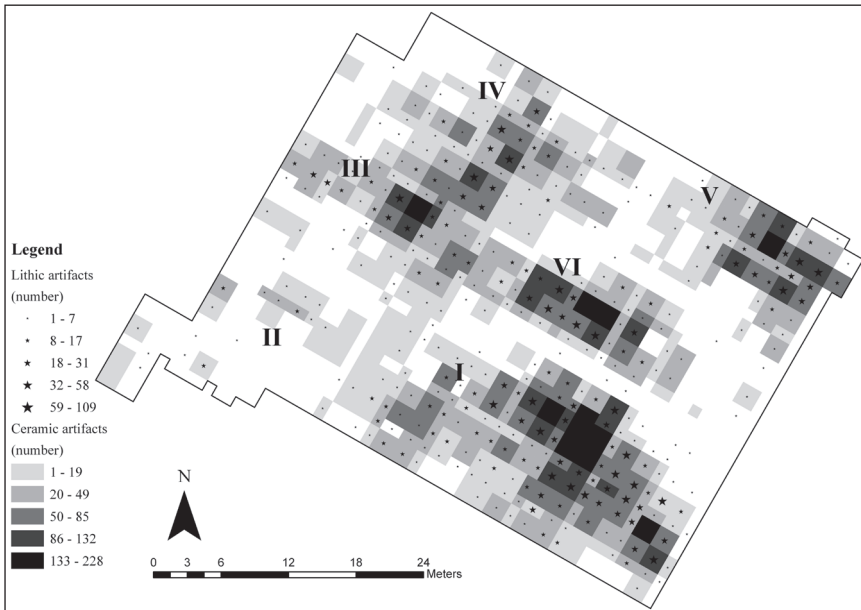


Figure 8.3 Distribution of the lithic and ceramic artifacts (image by authors)

8.3 illustrates the six main artifact concentrations in association with the postholes. Based on the distribution of postholes and burials, it seems that the area in the southwest corner (II) probably can be identified as one locality where houses might exist. However, recent road construction removed most of the cultural layer in this area. Therefore, the following analysis excludes the data from this locality.

Table 8.1 shows the numbers and relative frequencies of ceramic artifacts from each locality. Table 8.2 demonstrates the numbers and relative frequencies of lithic artifacts from each locality. Lithic artifacts associated with tool production and ceramic vessels are the most common artifact type in each location, clearly demonstrating that each locality consists of similar types of artifacts.

The presence of similar artifact types associated with these identified house localities suggests that similar activities occurred in each space. Most artifact types – ground and chipped stone tools and ceramic vessels and tools – are present in every locality. These artifacts indicate that the daily activities conducted by prehistoric Wansan people included hunting, fishing, land clearing, woodworking, tool production, harvesting, and weaving. Even though similar activities were practiced in the majority of places, emphasis on specific activities in particular places can be determined. Lithic tool production and maintenance is the most general activity; artifacts associated with tool production, such as whetstones, lithic debitage, and preforms, were predominant in each locus.

In conclusion, the repeated occurrence of basic activities indicates that the inhabitants of each house probably organized themselves as an independent social and residential unit to carry out certain repetitive activities necessary for daily life. Crafting activities, such as weaving or ornament making, and

		Vessel	Spindle whorl	Bracelet	Figurine	Knife	Unclear	Total
Locality I	Number	10,733	52	7	1	1	165	10,959
	RF	97.9%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.5%	100.0%
Locality III	Number	4890	40	21	3	1	52	5007
	RF	97.7%	0.8%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	100.0%
Locality IV	Number	1595	21	25	-	-	23	1664
	RF	95.9%	1.2%	1.5%	-	-	1.4%	100.0%
Locality V	Number	3,686	18	5	2	-	38	3,749
	RF	98.5%	0.4%	0.1%	0.0%	-	0.9%	100.0%
Locality VI	Number	4,538	27	6	-	-	22	4593
	RF	98.8%	0.5%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%	100.0%

Table 8.1 Number and relative frequencies of ceramic artifacts. (RF refers to the relative frequencies in each locality)

Possible function unfunction	Tool		Locality I	Locality III	Locality IV	Locality V	Locality VI
Cutting	Knife	Number	98	32	12	33	20
		RF	3.4%	2.6%	3.1%	4.6%	3.0%
Earth-clearing	Hoe-axe	Number	163	69	26	37	44
		RF	6.0%	8.3%	6.6%	12.3%	7.0%
Expedient	Scraper	Number	26	8	2	1	5
		RF	1.2%	1.0%	0.5%	0.3%	0.8%
Fishing	Net Sinker	Number	147	78	33	36	57
		RF	5.3%	9.4%	8.4%	12.0%	8.6%
Harvesting	Multiperforated Tool	Number	274	52	24	44	65
		RF	9.5%	6.3%	6.1%	5.8%	10.0%
	Polished Perforated Disk	Number	57	13	7	22	7
		RF	1.9%	1.6%	1.8%	7.3%	1.0%
	Polished Disk	Number	11	1	3	1	2
		RF	0.4%	0.1%	0.8%	0.3%	0.3%
	Sickle	Number	12	2	2	2	2
		RF	0.5%	0.2%	0.5%	0.6%	0.3%
Hunting	Arrow	Number	101	37	24	22	39
		RF	3.3%	4.5%	6.1%	2.1%	6.1%
Ornament	Bracelet/earring	Number	175	82	49	38	73
		RF	7.4%	9.9%	12.5%	7.9%	11.8%
Others	Chopper	Number	23	6	1	1	5
		RF	0.7%	0.7%	0.3%	0.3%	0.7%
	Pointer	Number	7	2	2	1	3
		RF	0.3%	0.2%	0.5%	0.3%	0.5%
	Disk	Number	101	40	12	39	22
		RF	3.7%	4.8%	3.1%	1.3%	3.4%
Processing	Anvil	Number	15	4	1	1	4
		RF	0.6%	0.5%	0.3%	0.3%	0.6%
	Hammer	Number	12	3	1	1	3
		RF	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%	0.5%
	Mortar	Number	3	1	1	-	-
		RF	0.1%	0.1%	0.3%	-	-
	Pestle	Number	3	2	-	2	1
		RF	0.2%	0.2%	-	0.7%	0.1%
Tool-making	Unfinished Artifacts, Debitage	Number	938	271	95	278	166
		RF	32.0%	32.7%	24.3%	28.1%	25.9%
	Whetstone	Number	435	92	67	140	76
		RF	15.3%	11.1%	17.1%	19.3%	11.9%
	Perforated disk	Number	93	10	14	26	18
		RF	3.3%	1.2%	3.6%	5.1%	2.8%
Woodworking	Adze-axe	Number	117	34	15	30	28
		RF	4.5%	4.1%	3.8%	7.0%	4.3%
Total	Total	Number	2811	829	391	755	640
		RF	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 8.2 Number and relative frequencies of lithic artifacts. (RF refers to the relative frequencies in each locality)

the production of useful implements, such as lithic tools, occurred in every locality. Added to this mix of activities and interactions that were tied to economic production and social reproduction was an emphasis on important mortuary rituals. Burials were found in every locality, and the participation in ritual necessarily reinforced the solidarity of these residents.

Conclusion

The concept of house society suggests that the house can have multiple meanings in human social life. The rich ethnographic work conducted in contemporary house societies offers numerous examples for archaeologists to explore these meanings from archaeological remains. In this paper, we have argued that the residential house in Neolithic Wansan society was also a sacred place where ancestral rituals were constantly performed. Furthermore, due to the practice of these rituals, the houses were transformed into a sacred space.

Through the analysis of the distribution of features and artifacts, we illustrate that hunting, fishing, and certain level of agricultural activities were probably the Neolithic Wansan community's main subsistence activities. The presence of large amounts of broken potsherds, such as cooking, storing, and serving vessels, suggests that the house structures at the Wansan site were places in which people carried out the ordinary activities of daily life. Weaving and tool production also played an important role in their lives. Based on the undifferentiated types of artifacts concentrated outside of the houses, the residents of each house probably conducted similar activities on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the burials surrounding the houses prove that these houses were not purely domestic structures for daily life. The house residents also made an effort to execute proper mortuary rituals, acquiring materials for the coffins from other places, assembling slate coffins or molding specific mortuary jars, and preparing particular grave goods to inter with the corpses, then interring the deceased around the house.

The extensive ethnographic research in house societies provides numerous examples to demonstrate that the houses can be both secular and sacred places where mundane and ritualistic activities can be carried out simultaneously. We have also shown how Neolithic Wansan people created their connection with the place through building their residential houses on specific locations within the landscape and conducting their everyday lives in and around the houses. At the same time, they imbued their residential houses with sacred power by interring their deceased members in the areas surrounding the houses. The houses were more than roofed areas for the living; they were also places where the deceased resided. This exploration of the significance

of houses in Wansan society thus testifies that no such separation between their domestic and sacred spaces existed. On the contrary, for the Wansan people the landscape in which ritual and daily practices were conducted was both secular and sacred.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 The Austronesian languages form a single language family and it is the most widespread language family in the world. The distribution of the Austronesian-speaking peoples covers almost half of the globe, including the indigenous peoples of Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Madagascar, and all of the peoples in the Oceanic Islands.
- 2 The data employed in this paper was primarily collected from the rescue excavation conducted in 1998. The 1998 excavation was initiated due to a pagoda-tower construction. The local government asked the archaeologist, Yi-chang Liu, from the Institute of History and Philology to conduct a rescue excavation. This excavation uncovered an area about 2,225 m².

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