

Hong Xu

# The Earliest China



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Hong Xu  
CASS  
Institute of Archaeology  
Beijing, China

*Translated by*  
Li Sang  
Luoyang Normal University  
Henan, China

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## Preface

Erlitou is originally the name of an ordinary village located in the Luoyang Plain, the hinterland of the Central Plains. Like the names of thousands of villages in China, she is as simple as she could be. But just behind her, under the green wheat fields, it has hidden a glorious history of the Hua-Xia ethnic group for more than 3,000 years, which has also been forgotten by her descendants for over 3,000 years; it was not until 60 years ago that she came into the field of vision of archeologists, and since then, she has been among the halls of the history of Chinese civilization and even the history of world civilization. We also know from this that based on the accumulation of thousands of years of the Hua-Xia prehistoric culture, the earliest “China” came into being here.



View of distant for the excavation scene at Erlitou site<sup>1</sup>

“Born in Suzhou and Hangzhou, and buried in the north of Mangshan Mountain.” The winding mountain in the distance is Mangshan Mountain, which was regarded as “Feng Shui Treasure,” the first pursuit of life ideal by ancient Chinese people. Villagers call the palace area we excavated as “throne room,” and here is indeed the earliest “throne room” in China.

Beijing, China  
Luoyang, China

Hong Xu  
Li Sang

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<sup>1</sup> All the photos in this book that are not quoted specifically were taken by the author himself or the expedition team.

# Acknowledgments

This work has been done for more than three years in Luoyang City as a teacher of archeology in University, under the financial support of National Social Science Fund, namely the Translation Works for the Chinese Academy (2015–2020).

First of all, I would like to thank my family, that is, my husband, my son, my girl and my parents, who gave me plenty of time, many understandings and various supports, and without their loves and encouragements, I would not have the chance to complete the delivery of the book draft in time. Then, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all the staffs of Science Press, who helped me a lot apply for the fund and publish the book. Special thanks to the editors of Springer-Verlag for carefully revising my manuscript. I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Hong Xu for giving me so precious opportunity to translate his excellent work. Translating work is tougher than I expected, and there will still be imperfections in translating and academic issues to be solved in the original book. Hopefully, this book is worthy of readers' expectation and my efforts.

At last, I am greatly indebted to Prof. Dr. Peter Pfälzner from Tübingen University, Germany, who was my supervisor during four years of my doctoral education. He led me to write my dissertation in English and gave me great encouragement to write academic books or articles in language other my mother tongue. He always says that the language is the carrier of ideas and thoughts, which is also a good tool for our academic exchange. This is my first attempt to write an English translation book, and it is to be hoped that a well-done work is the best present for him.

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Explanation for the Theme</b> .....	1
1.1	What is “China”? .....	1
1.2	Seeing What the Literature Can Tell .....	3
1.3	The Bronze Inscriptions of Western Zhou Dynasty Pointing the Earliest “China” to the Luoyang Basin .....	5
	References .....	8
<b>2</b>	<b>Creating a New Era</b> .....	9
2.1	The Heroic Age “Full of Stars in the Sky” .....	10
2.2	Three Steps of Civilization: State, Dynasty and Empire .....	13
2.3	The Birth of “China” in the Erlitou Era .....	15
2.4	One Point and One Plane: Two Characteristics of the Earliest “China” .....	20
	References .....	23
<b>3</b>	<b>Global Perspective</b> .....	25
3.1	Six Major Civilizations, Two Systems of Impacting on the World History .....	25
3.2	River Civilizations in the “Old World” .....	27
3.3	Some Scholars Think that the Aegean Sea is Also a Great Birthplace .....	29
3.4	Views on Similarity and Difference of Ancient Civilization .....	30
3.5	Chinese Civilization in the History of Global Civilization .....	30
3.6	Clarity of History: The Comparison from Another Perspective .....	34
3.7	Why is the Chronology of Early China Inexplicit? .....	35
	References .....	38
<b>4</b>	<b>Dream-Seeking Journey</b> .....	39
4.1	Exploration from the Known to the Unknown .....	39
4.2	Xu Xusheng Who Discovered Erlitou Searching for the “Ruins of Xia Dynasty” .....	43

4.3	Tremendous Achievements for Half a Century .....	45
	References .....	49
<b>5</b>	<b>Mystifying Scene .....</b>	<b>51</b>
5.1	Is the Early Dynastic History Recorded in the Literature Credible? .....	51
5.2	Suspicious of the Royal Lineage .....	52
5.3	“Debate on Ancient History” Sweeping the Traditional Ancient History .....	54
5.4	Modern Archaeology Emerging at the Right Moment in China .....	55
5.5	Erlitou: Did It Belong to Xia Dynasty or Shang Dynasty? .....	56
5.6	The Enlightenment of the Research History .....	58
	References .....	59
<b>6</b>	<b>Genius of the Central Plains .....</b>	<b>61</b>
6.1	The Oriental “Two River Valleys”: Seedbed of Agricultural Origin .....	62
6.2	The Central Plains: The Center of a Double Flower .....	64
6.3	Converging on the Strategic Transportation Area from All Directions .....	65
6.4	Convergence Zone of the Two Agricultural Areas .....	67
6.5	Junction of Two Geographical and Cultural Plates .....	68
6.6	Luoyang Basin: The “Geographical Kingdom” with the Best Topographical Advantages in the World .....	71
6.7	Erlitou: The Great Achievement of “Cultural Hybridization” .....	73
	References .....	74
<b>7</b>	<b>The Imposing Manner of the Royal Capital .....</b>	<b>75</b>
7.1	Excellent Location of the Capital .....	75
7.2	The Past and Present of Erlitou: Scanning the General Trend of Settlement Evolution .....	78
7.3	Super Large-Scale Capital City with Highly Concentrated Population .....	82
7.4	Complexity and Functional Division of the Capital .....	83
7.5	Road Network System in the Central Area .....	86
7.6	Discovery of the Big “Crossroad” .....	87
7.7	Unprecedented City Planning .....	89
	References .....	92
<b>8</b>	<b>Building in the Middle and Erecting in the North .....</b>	<b>93</b>
8.1	The Earliest “Forbidden City” in China .....	94
8.2	The Palace City To Be “Thought” Out .....	95
8.3	Palace Architectural Complexes with Central Axis Planning .....	99

8.4	Court Hall with the Atrium that can Accommodate Tens of Thousands of People .....	101
8.5	The Massive “Cohesion Project” .....	105
8.6	Magnificent South Gate of the Palace City .....	107
8.7	Architectural Complex East: A Temple or a Place for Ancestral Veneration? .....	107
8.8	“Construction Methods” of the Palace Architecture .....	113
8.9	The Tip of the Iceberg of Early Palaces .....	113
8.10	The Formation of “Court” and “Ritual System” .....	116
	References .....	121
<b>9</b>	<b>Affairs of the State</b> .....	<b>123</b>
9.1	Discovery of the Sacrificial Remain Area .....	123
9.2	Ritual Items: Logo of Chinese Bronze Age .....	125
9.3	From Pottery Drinking Vessels to Bronze Drinking Vessels .....	126
9.4	Pottery Gui (鬯) and “Cock-Shaped Pot (鸡彝)” .....	130
9.5	Invention of the First Bronze Drinking Vessel, Jue (爵) .....	131
9.6	From the “Jade of Worship” to the “Ritual Jade” .....	133
9.7	The East Wind Spreading to the West: Large-Sized Bladed Jade Ritual Assemblage .....	134
9.8	Mystery of the Handle-Shaped Item .....	136
9.9	Jade Items Indicating the Hierarchical Order .....	140
9.10	No Music, No Ceremony: A Glimpse of Musical Instruments .....	141
9.11	Divination Custom with Animal Bones and Without Tortoise Shells .....	143
9.12	The Earliest Ritual Weapons in China .....	143
9.13	Yue, Power of Military Commanding, Monarchy Power .....	147
9.14	Big Enlightenment of Small Arrowheads .....	148
	References .....	150
<b>10</b>	<b>The Society of the Capital City</b> .....	<b>151</b>
10.1	Large-Scale Population Mobilization .....	151
10.2	Complexity of Ethnicity: The Earliest Immigrant City in China .....	152
10.3	From Palace to Semi-subterranean “Shack” .....	154
10.4	Pyramid-Like Funerary Hierarchy .....	156
10.5	A Myriad of Stars Surrounding the Moon: A Bird’s Eye View of Settlement Distribution Pattern .....	157
	Reference .....	160
<b>11</b>	<b>Atmosphere of Civilization</b> .....	<b>161</b>
11.1	Was There Any Writing in Erlitou? .....	161
11.2	Traces: Early Artifacts in Oracles and Bronze Inscriptions .....	163
11.3	Bluish Green Dragon Suddenly Appearing in “The First Capital” .....	164

11.4	Super National Treasure that is Hard to Come Out	166
11.5	Dragon Plaque, Dragon Mace or Dragon Flag?	168
11.6	Exploration on the Prototype of Turquoise Dragon	168
11.7	Strange Bronze Plate Decoration with Animal Facial Pattern	170
11.8	Dragon Images on Pottery	170
11.9	From Many Dragons Placed Together to the Normalization of “Taotie”	172
	References	179
<b>12</b>	<b>Wonderful Workmanship Excelling Nature</b>	<b>181</b>
12.1	Industrial City Beside Palace City: “National High-Tech Industrial Base”	181
12.2	The Earliest Workshop for Bronze Casting	183
12.3	Ritual System Demand Stimulating Smelting and Casting Industry as “Dark Horse” to Leap	185
12.4	Distinctive and Complicated Bronze Technology	186
12.5	Amazing Information Revealed by Pottery Quadripod (Ding)	188
12.6	Jade Treatment Technology Connecting the Preceding and the Following	189
12.7	Discovery of Turquoise Artifacts and Workshop	192
12.8	Sophisticated Inlaying Technology of Turquoise	193
12.9	Lacquerware: Another Important Category of Ritual Items	195
12.10	Fine Pottery, White Pottery and Proto-Porcelain	196
12.11	Brilliant Silk and Linen: Discovery of Textiles	199
	References	200
<b>13</b>	<b>People’s Livelihood of the City</b>	<b>201</b>
13.1	“Five Grains” that Were All Complete	201
13.2	Raising of Domestic Animals, Fishing and Hunting	203
13.3	With Cooking Utensils to See the Kitchen	205
13.4	With Food Serving Utensils to See How to Eat	207
13.5	Erlitou People Who Enjoyed “Barbeque”	210
13.6	Mystery of the Origin of the Earliest Two Wheeled Carts and Horse-drawn Chariots	210
<b>14</b>	<b>All the Rivers Running into the Sea</b>	<b>215</b>
14.1	Warm Breeze from the South Area of the Yangtze River: Hard Pottery, Cloudscape Pattern and Duck-Shaped Vessel	216
14.2	Tropical Seashells of Unknown Origin	219
14.3	Impact Wave from the Eurasian Steppe Culture	220
14.4	Message of Nomadic Civilization: Battle-Axe and Ring Head Knife	223
14.5	Convergence of Adjacent Cultural Factors	224
14.6	Mystery of the Source of Bronze Raw Materials	225

14.7 “Metal Road and Tin Line”: A Study About  
the Transportation Network ..... 227  
References ..... 229

**15 Powerful Radiation ..... 231**

15.1 Historical Background of the Spread of Drinking Vessels ..... 231

15.2 “Drinking Rituals” Suddenly Appearing Outside  
the Great Wall ..... 232

15.3 The Wind of Erlitou Culture Blowing in the Upper,  
Middle and Lower Yangtze River Valley ..... 233

15.4 The Spread of Jade Items Led by the Jade Tablet (Zhang) ..... 234

15.5 Bronze Plate Decoration with Animal Facial Pattern  
Except Erlitou ..... 235

15.6 From Erlitou to Erligang ..... 239

15.7 The “China” World in an Embryonic Form ..... 242

15.8 The Last Question: Why “China”? ..... 245

References ..... 246

**Appendix: (Translation between English and Chinese) ..... 247**

# Chapter 1

## Explanation for the Theme



### The Origin of China



The most important thing in doing research is the accuracy of concepts. To figure out how the earliest “China” came from, we should first review the context of the word of “China” with you.

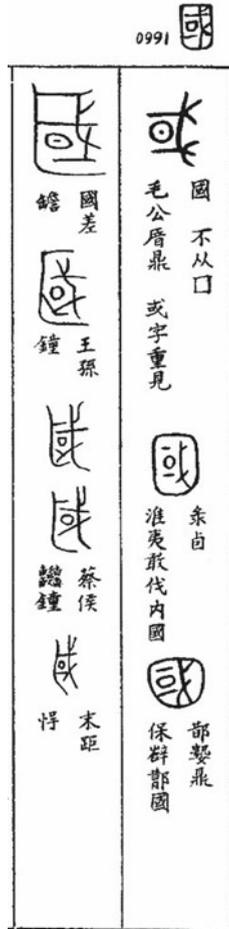
In ancient China, the meaning of the word “Guo” was “city” or “state”. It can be seen from its glyph that a state takes the capital city as the center and combines with the surrounding rural areas, it is also marked by the existence of the capital. “Zhongguo” was “a central city” or “a central state”. After the word “Zhongguo” appeared, it derived a variety of meanings in ancient China alone, such as the capital of the kingdom and its adjacent area, the central plain area, the inner country or inland, the habitation of various Xia nations, and even the Hua-Xia state.

Among them, the closest one to the original meaning of the word “China” is “the kingdom capital and the capital area”, which was the power center of the monarchy state.

In this sense, the emergence of “China” was synchronous with the formation of the earliest monarchy state (or dynasty) on the East Asian continent.

#### 1.1 What is “China”?

The most important thing in doing research is the accuracy of concepts. To figure out how the earliest “China” came from, we should first review the context of the word “China” with you (Fig. 1.1).



**Fig. 1.1** The character of “国” in the bronze inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> Among the bronze inscriptions, the original glyph of the character “国” is like “戈” added with “口”, that is the character of “或”. Among them, “戈” is a sound symbol and has a meaning of guarding the city by holding a dagger (Ge), and “口” represents a city. By the Spring and Autumn period, it had also been added with a outline “口”, which means the boundaries of a country. The initial character of “国” had no definite boundary, and the earliest word of “国” faithfully recorded this feature

In ancient China, the meaning of the word “Guo” was “city” or “state”. It can be seen from its glyph that a state is centered on the capital and combined with the surrounding rural areas, and it is also marked by the existence of the capital. “Zhongguo” was “a central city” or “a central state”. After the word “Zhongguo” appeared, it derived a variety of meanings in ancient China alone, such as the kingdom capital and the capital area, the central plain area, the inner country or the inland, the

<sup>1</sup> Geng (ed.), 1985.

habitation of various Xia nations, and even the Hua-Xia state. “China” as the formal name with the concept of modern country began with “the Republic of China”, which is its short term, CHINA in English; now, it is also the short term of “the People Republic of China”.

Among them, the closest one to the original meaning of the word “China” is “the kingdom capital and the capital area”, which was the power center of the monarchy state, and had formed a strong cultural “magnetic field” with centripetal force and radiation. For its central location and convenient geographical position, it is also called as “central state”, “central earth” or “central plain”. In this sense, the emergence of “China” was synchronous with the formation of the earliest monarchy state (or dynasty) on the East Asian continent (Fig. 1.2).

It should be noted that the early state was comprised of many “points” spatially, these settlement points of different hierarchies formed a ruling network centered on the central cities, and the modern concept of national boundaries delimiting the border line did not exist at that time. The earliest “China” only refers to the royal capital, which rose during a competitive process, and the area where a social political entity centered on the capital was located, especially its central area. Subsequently, with the entering of the East Asian continent into the era of empire from that of kingdom, and the expansion of the political sphere of the successive dynasties, the word of “China” was regarded as the concept of geography, culture and political territory and its connotation had also experienced a process of continuous expansion and change. Meanwhile, its origin is gradually unknown; people often know “China”, but don’t know where the earliest China was, how it rose nor what glory it had.

## 1.2 Seeing What the Literature Can Tell

Based on the above analysis, the earliest “China” should have been the earliest capital of dynasty and its adjacent areas. In classical literature, the word “China” first appeared in the books of Eastern Zhou period such as *Shang Shu* and the Book of Songs. In *Zi Cai* of *Shang Shu*, it talks about the admonition by Duke Zhou that he taught to his younger brother, *Kang Shu*, how to reign the previous territory of the late Shang Dynasty. Among them, “*Huang Tian Ji Fu Zhong Guo Min Yue Jue Jiang Tu Yu Xian Wang*” means that the Heaven handed over the land and people of China to the former kings of Zhou Dynasty. Here China refers to the Central Plains between the Central Shaanxi area and the area of the Yellow River and the Luo River. In *Min Lao* of *Da Ya*, the Book of Songs, “China is benefited here to settle down four directions..., *Jing Shi* is benefited here to settle down four states”, of which “China” has the same meaning as “*Jing Shi*”. Other culture-standardized words to call the dynastic capital of Shang Dynasty itself are seen in the oracles<sup>2</sup> of Yin Ruins such as

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<sup>2</sup> Oracles refer to the oracle bone inscriptions found in the Yin-Ruins site, which is written as the short term of oracles in the following.

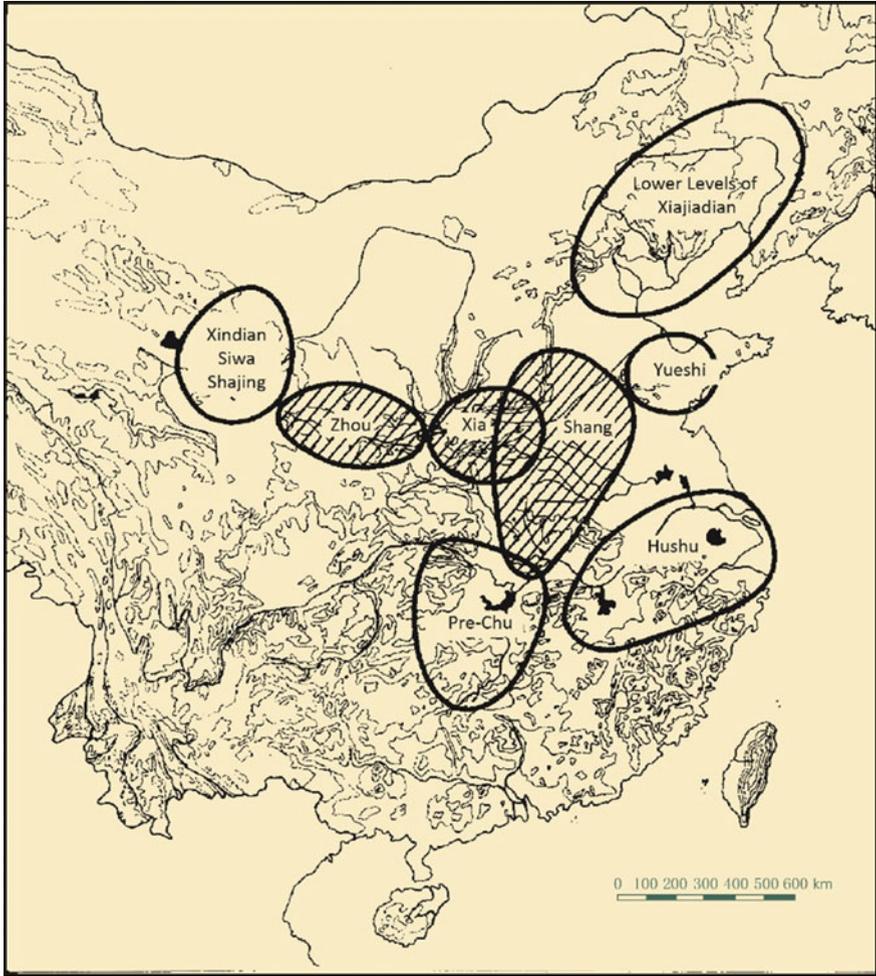


Fig. 1.2 The rise of three dynasties in the Central Plains<sup>3</sup>

“the central Shang”, “big city of Shang” and “heaven city of Shang”, their meanings should correspond to the “China” in the Western-Zhou period (Fig. 1.3).

According to literature, the earliest dynasties should have been Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, mainly located in the Central Plains, not exceeding the core area in the middle Yellow River. This area should be so-called the earliest China.

<sup>3</sup> Kwang-chih, 1981, trans. by Liangren et al., 2002.



Fig. 1.3 Texts about China seen in *Shang Shu*<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3 The Bronze Inscriptions of Western Zhou Dynasty Pointing the Earliest “China” to the Luoyang Basin

Among the unearthed cultural relics, the word of “China” has been first seen in the inscriptions on a bronze vessel of “He Zun” in the early stage of Western Zhou Dynasty. This important item of national treasure was found in 1963 at Baoji City, Shaanxi Province. The 122-word inscription tells that the King Wu of Zhou Dynasty made a big decision of founding the eastern capital after conquering the Shang Dynasty, he venerated and told the Heaven that “I would like to build it in China and reign the people from it”, and he intended to found a capital in the center of the world and reign the people from here. This inscription refers the earliest geographical position of “China” to the Luoyang Basin where Luoyi was located and the Central Plain area centered on it. When this period of history was recorded in the *Chronicles of Zhou Dynasty of the Records of the Grand Historian*, the words of Duke Zhou were also quoted, and he regarded the Luoyang Basin as “the center of the world, where the tributes from all directions can be paid at the same distance”.

Favored by the Western Zhou Dynasty, Luoyang Basin, which was regarded as “the center of the world”, was where the eastern capital was built, and had more than ten dynasties founded their capitals here one after another for over 2000 years. In *Sima Qian’s Records of the Grand Historian*, it records that “all of the three dynasties were located between the Yellow River and Luohe River” (in *Feng Shan Shu* of the

<sup>4</sup> Yuan (from Qing Dynasty), 1980.



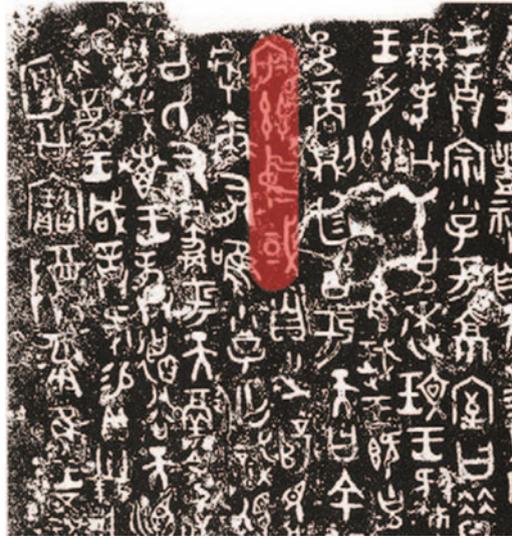
**Fig. 1.4** “He Zun” of national treasure<sup>5</sup>

Records of the Grand Historian); thereafter, other dynasties such as the Eastern Han, the Wei State, the Western Jin, the Northern Wei, the Sui and Tang had their capitals founded here. This is extremely rare in the history of world civilization. Among them, the Erlitou site was the first large-scale capital city in Luoyang Basin, an area which comprised the earliest “China” (Figs. 1.4 and 1.6).

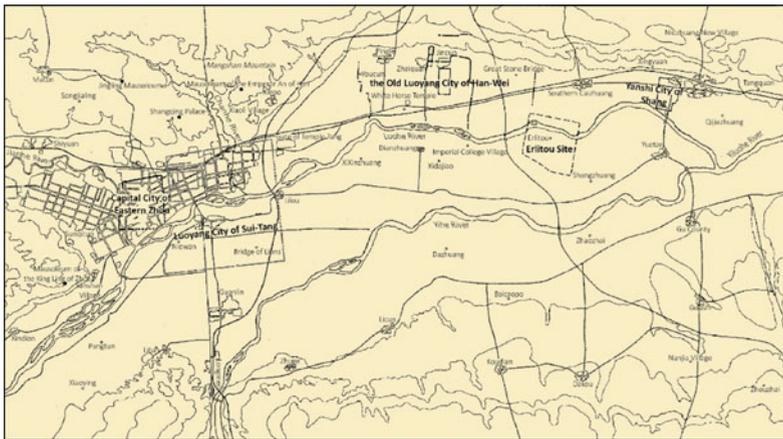
Today, in the central part of the Luoyang Basin stretching from east to west more than 30 km, five capital sites are arranged from west to east, including the Capital City of Eastern Zhou Dynasty, the Luoyang City of Sui-Tang Dynasty, the Old Luoyang City of Han-Wei Dynasties, the Erlitou Site, and the Yanshi City of Shang Dynasty, which have been regarded as five bright pearls in the hinterland area of Hua-Xia civilization.

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<sup>5</sup> State Administration of Cultural Heritage (ed.), 1995.



**Fig. 1.5** “zhai zi zhong guo” in the inscriptions on “He Zun”.<sup>6</sup> The inscription records that when the King Cheng of Zhou Dynasty started to build the eastern capital of Luoyi at the beginning of Zhou Dynasty, royal orders were announced to the members of the royal clan on a worship ceremony. This is the first unearthed literature in which the China-like words appeared Fig. 1.5



**Fig. 1.6** Situation of the ancient capitals in Luoyang<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A rubbing from the inscriptions on “He Zun”.

<sup>7</sup> Institute of Archaeology, CASS (ed.), 1998.

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## Chapter 2

# Creating a New Era



## From “Pluralistic States” to “Integrated Dynasty”



If we look further into space and time, we could recognize more clearly where the position of Erlitou and its significance in the history of Hua-Xia civilization are. This age of states, the era of dynasties (three dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou) and the later imperial times (Qin and Han till Ming and Qing) constitute three major stages in the development of ancient Chinese civilization.

Among them, the most important milestone is the emergence of the kingdom, that is, the early dynasty.

With the rise of the Erlitou capital and the Erlitou culture, Hua-Xia civilization had entered into an integrated dynastic period from the pluralistic state period.

The Erlitou site is located in Yanshi city, in the east of Luoyang Basin, the most abundant cultural remains on the site belong to the Erlitou culture, which is dated to the first half of second millennium BC,<sup>1</sup> ca. 1800 ~ 1500 BC, corresponding to the Xia and Shang Dynasties in ancient literature. The famous “Erlitou culture” is thus named.

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<sup>1</sup> Millennium equals to 1000 years, consistent with ten centuries years.

If we look further into space and time, we could recognize more clearly where the position of Erlitou and its significance in the history of Hua-Xia civilization are.

## 2.1 The Heroic Age “Full of Stars in the Sky”

On the East Asian continent, it was a quiet long process that the prehistoric society of general equality had evolved into the hierarchical, state forming, and civilized society. Before the monarchy states of wide-area, which were called as three dynasties of Xia-Shang-Zhou in the Chinese ancient literature, was formed, cultures in different regions independently developed in the vast Yellow River and Yangtze River Valleys and they also demonstrated the similarity across regions. It was a period for the co-existence and competition of many independent tribes or ancient states, which has been called the Longshan period by Professor Yan Wenming of Beijing University, corresponding to the third millennium BC, 3000–2000 BC. On the basis on the latest results of archaeological and chronological studies, the end of time may be from ca. 1800 BC, connected to the Erlitou culture (Fig. 2.1).

In ancient literature, such small social organizations were called as “ten thousand of states” (in Yao Dian of *Shang Shu*, all the officials did their duties with “ten thousand of states” being coordinated), or “ten thousand of nations” (the feudal lords were assembled by Yu in Tushan Mountain with “ten thousand of nations” holding jades or silks, in Tso Chuan, *Ai Gong Qi Nian*). At present, some of the scholars view that they were the early states, while others call them the ethnic nations, or believe that they corresponded to the chiefdoms proposed by the western academic circles; that is, they couldn’t be up to the state level. Such debates on the definition would be continuously made as an academic issue, but it is agreed that they belong to a hierarchical, complex society. At that time, the powerful core culture may not have appeared, especially across geographies, and it is also an indisputable fact that the situation of the world can be described as “the competitions of warlords” or “the sky covered with stars”. Some people have described this surging time as the heroic age in China, and that was truly an exciting time (Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1** Chronology and distribution of main archaeological cultures of prehistoric age to the early Bronze Age

BC	North of Yanshan	Upper Yellow R	Middle Yellow R	Middle Yangtze R	Lower Yellow R	Lower Yangtze R	Upper Yangtze R
3500	Hongshan	Late Yangshao P		Youziling	Middle Dawenkou	Songze	
	↓	↓		↓	↓	↓	
		Majiayao				Early Liangzhu	
3000		↓		Qujialing		↓	
				↓		Middle Liangzhu	
	Xiaoheyan		Miaodigou Type		Late Dawenkou	↓	
	↓	↓	↓		↓		
2500				Shijiahe		Late Liangzhu	
				↓		↓	
			Longshan P		Haidai Longshan	Guangfulin Type	Baodun
2000		Qijia	In Central Plains	Xiaojiajuji	↓	↓	↓
		↓		↓			
			Xinzhai				
1500	Ls. of Xiajiadian			Erlitou	Yueshi		
	↓	Regional BA		↓	↓	Maqiao etc.	Sanxingdui
		↓		Erligang		↓	↓
			Yin Ruins Shang P	Regional BA	Yin Ruins Shang P		
	Regional BA		↓	↓	↓	Regional BA	

(continued)

**Table 2.1** (continued)

BC	North of Yanshan	Upper Yellow R	Middle Yellow R	Middle Yangtze R	Lower Yellow R	Lower Yangtze R	Upper Yangtze R
1000	↓			Western Zhou P		↓	Twelve bridges

*Note* BA Bronze Age; P period; Ls lower levels; R river

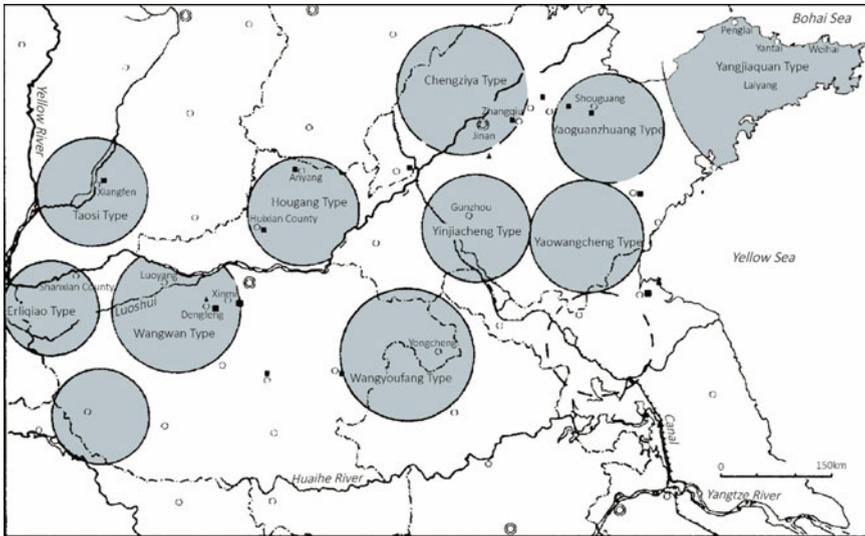


**Fig. 2.1** Main cultural distributions in the Yellow River and Yangtze River Valleys of the prehistoric age<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2 Three Steps of Civilization: State, Dynasty and Empire

Before the formation of the wide-area monarchy state, there was a period when many small political entities co-existed and competed; some people have called it “the era of states”, others have called it “the age of ancient nations” and the period of “ten thousand of states”; their meanings are almost the same, referring to the era when social organizations of “small country and few people” co-existed. This age of states, the era of dynasties (three dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou) and the later imperial times (Qin and Han till Ming and Qing) constitute three major stages in the development of ancient Chinese civilization. During this process, state entities were merged from more to less and even unified, and the reigning and influence scope of the central dynasty was expanding increasingly. According to the historical records, in *Da Yu* times were ten thousand of states, three thousand in the early Zhou Dynasty, eight hundred in the Spring and Autumn period, and seven in the Warring States period; in the Qin and Han Dynasties, an empire was unified. In contrast to the social organizations, states, from more to less, the power center, the capital city, grew from small to large; there was a process from the central settlement to the capital of a small state, then to the capital of a kingdom, and then the expansion into the imperial capital.

<sup>2</sup> Wenming, 2000.



**Fig. 2.2** Many city sites that emerged in the Central Plains during the Longshan period<sup>3</sup>

Among them, the most important milestone is the emergence of the kingdom, that is, the early dynasty. There were different stratifications co-existing in the society at the time, including a kingdom in the center, other states around (they had subordination, semi subordination or alliance with the kingdom, or they had, and some of them sometimes submitted or betrayed. In contrast to the central kingdom, they were perhaps called “feudal states”), and other “complex societies” as chiefdoms that had not yet developed into states, or even equal clan and tribal societies. In this sense, the kingdom, as a higher level of civilization than the state, may also contain political entities such as feudal states, so it can also be described as “the state above states”. Therefore, the concept of “China” embodies the meanings of “central”, “center”, “royal capital” and “capital area” cannot be traced back to the “era of states” with “small country and few people”; it should have appeared contemporaneously with the earliest dynasty, that is, the “central kingdom” (Fig. 2.2).

In 2009, an exhibition of Chinese prehistorical painted pottery was shown in the Museum of Oriental Antiquities, Sweden, named as “China before China”. The exhibition had that name, “in order to demonstrate the rich, cultural creativity of the ancient people who have lived on the land of China for today, showing what had happened before China was established, or its name was settled.” This is consistent with our understanding of China (Fig. 2.3).

<sup>3</sup> Yaopeng, 2001.